

**THE REPRESENTATION OF CHARACTER IN ES'KIA MPHAHLELE'S  
WRITINGS: A COMPARISON OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY **DOWN SECOND  
AVENUE** (1959) AND THE NOVEL **THE WANDERERS** (1971) WITH  
HIS PHILOSOPHY IN **THE AFRICAN IMAGE** (1974).**

by

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## **SYNOPSIS**

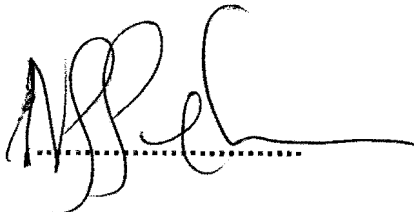
Literary representation of character in South Africa is not just problematic but also complicated by racial dynamics, which easily lead to prejudiced portrayal by most writers. Mphahlele's reaction to White writing's "distortion" of the image of Blacks, in his critical texts resulted in his being labelled a protest writer. Concerning his creative writing, he admits that he initially couldn't portray the character of a white person roundedly due to limited acquaintance with him. What he only knows about him and therefore depicts in his early writings is the White stereotype. His acquaintance with the White world through varied interaction gives a leverage that improves his portrayal of the White character. Consequently his later works reflect objective representation of characters from different races . The study therefore concludes that he falls outside the bracket of protest writers, as his literary works prove to transcend the limitations of stereotypical character representation.

## **KEY TERMS**

Character representation; Es'kia Mphahlele's approach; Conceptualization; Human perspective; Stratification; Racial complexity; Author attitudes; Image building/distortion; Reader interpretations; Fictional/nonfictional character projection

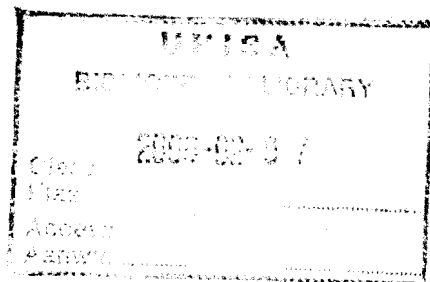
## DECLARATION

I declare that THE REPRESENTATION OF CHARACTER IN ES'KIA MPHAHLELE'S WRITINGS: A COMPARISON OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY **DOWN SECOND AVENUE** (1959) AND THE NOVEL **THE WANDERERS** (1971) WITH HIS PHILOSOPHY IN **THE AFRICAN IMAGE** (1974) is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.



**N.Z. SICWEBU**

**JUNE 1999**



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.....

**N.Z. SICWEBU**

## **1. PRELUDE**

### **1.1 METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE**

Es'kia Mphahlele ranks amongst a number of writers who dare to look into the political organization of South African society in their writings. Such a group would include individuals like Mongane Serote, Mtutuzeli Matshoba, Njabulo Ndebele, Mbulelo Mzamane, H.I.E. Dhlomo and Nadine Gordimer, inter alia. What he seems to share with these writers is the realization of a terrible racial division of the society and the negative effect this issue has on socio-economic living.

In an apparent attempt to respond to social decay and inhuman living conditions (entrenched by the apartheid system of government) experienced by certain racial groups, the writers mentioned above and most other non-white literary artists embarked on protest writing. This is reflected in both literary production and criticism. Mphahlele himself asserts that one of the origins of such a criticism was the establishment of the newspaper "Imvo Zabantsundu" in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This newspaper's appearance was marked by its attack on the passing of the "notorious" Act of the Union, and then the Land Act of 1913, which compelled Africans to be labour tenants on White people's farms and several other laws. Such laws enabled the Whites (i.e both Afrikaner and the



English) to fraternize and particularly by the Act of Union to dedicate themselves to the cause of white supremacy which was to rest on the pillars of Black serfdom (1974:203).

A much more organized form of protest in the form of literature would surely have followed pamphleteering and newspaper articles as non whites also got more enlightened. One writer of Mphahlele's era, Peter Abrahams, strongly reflects this feeling. In one of his writings, *The Path of Thunder* (1984), he attributes the inhuman relations between different races in south Africa to the "tyranny of place and time". He approves a good relation that emerges between Swartz, an African of mixed descent, and Sarie, an Afrikaner girl. Nevertheless the former's humanity is depicted as more appealing than the latter's. "The inhibitions caused by the oppressor" are seen to have left him, which could lead him to becoming a complex person. The friend also notes that such a development could end up being just a wishful thought due to impending inhibitions, something which cannot be blamed on Swartz and Sarie but on "this land and our time" (Abrahams 1984). According to this criticism one must be a native, a half-caste, a Jew, an Arab, an Englishman, a Chinaman or a Greek but never just a human being. This is a regrettable crime of the time. The author agrees that such love as theirs can be seen as a symbol of man's attempt to move beyond racial limits, which prohibit people to see each other as fellow human beings.

The so-called struggle literature became more visible and would characterize Black writing as the “left wing” writers would see themselves literally responding to what was seen as unjust and oppressive political decisions made by the White regime. Some of the most obvious instances which have spurred protest writers in their writing appear to be the pass system and the rather harsh response by the regime to the Soweto Revolt of June 1976. For instance, Serote’s poetry and Mzamane’s short stories implicitly deal mostly with influx control and the pass system. The former’s novel, **To every Birth Its Blood** (1981), can be mentioned as an indication of Black writers’ response to the Soweto Revolt (its causes and its consequences), some of which appears in non fictional texts. Such events as well as the regime’s brutality in crushing Black uprisings and the general opposition to the regime’s policies, obviously intensified Black protest which would be expressed through literature inter alia.

Apparently due to the divisions (that existed) between Black and White as indicated above and especially the fact that such divisions determined the status difference which meant low for the former and high for the latter, which in turn would determine governance roles as respectively the governed and the governor, Black writing inevitably came to be strongly associated with protest literature. It always seemed to consist of an element of protest since Blacks saw most legislation by the regime as unjust and oppressive to them (which was likely to continue as long as they were excluded from the legislature), and this

apparently led to most Black literature being “protest” or even “struggle” dominated, as other writers would emphasize the struggle by the Black masses against oppression by the White regime. Mphahlele’s reference to the status quo specifically in his autobiography identifies him as one of the “Black writers”, which suggests his writing to be predominantly “protest”, viz: a Black (in urban and township surroundings) had to know always that he was on White man’s land - he must live in houses built by him, a Black woman must do his washing, must buy his bread with his money and must be policed by him (1959:41).

Many critics assume Mphahlele to be a “struggle” writer, so all they seem to do in their writings or criticisms is to accentuate this quality. For instance, he, together with some other Black writers, is seen to have served proletarian readership within a capitalist hegemony buttressed by the elite cultures of Afrikaans on the one hand and English liberal humanism on the other (de Kock 1987:36). This also implies a rather more popular mobilization against the regime in a somewhat non-fictional form. His production of the magazine, “The voice” which led to his establishment of the “Drum” magazine gives an indication of such an approach. As the magazines concentrated on prose fiction but particularly treatment of Blacks on white farms and in prisons inter alia, they were seen as an expression of “the black man writing for the black man ... not addressing himself to the whites” (Jarrett - Kerr 1986:29).

Mphahlele's classification as a struggle writer is also apparent in some of his short stories, like "**The Master of Doornvlei**". This story focusses on a White versus Black and master versus servant conflict, that Ruth (1986:72) notes as having been quintessentially a South African relationship that often served as the model for the whole Black/White relationship in the country. Sarel Britz, a white farmer (who is the main character) relies too much on his tyrannical black foreman to enforce the oppression of the (black) labourers. The White paternalism which is mostly equated with oppression is apparently demonstrated by the author in the climax of the story. This is seen in the fight between Donker, Mfukeri's bull and Kaspar, Britz's stallion. The latter is severely gored and this leads to Britz shooting the stallion. He then expects Mfukeri to follow suit. The resistance to follow the instruction leads to the expulsion of the Black foreman from the farm. According to Ruth, Mphahlele's point (in this story) is to protest against Black exploitation which is intensified by Whites through elevating few conforming Blacks. In Sarel Britz, he seems to have put his finger on the terror of the master and described the intransigent consciousness that all slaves eventually face in their struggle for liberation. It is Mfukeri who is immediately alienated from the workers as he is seen as a tyrant on behalf of White oppression.

Through his assertion, "We see each other through a Keyhole - we Blacks and Whites ..." (1974:14), Mphahlele seems to describe the South African scenario in two respective worlds. According to this view most of his works reflect this

division which accentuates the “protest” approach he is identified with. In “Mrs Plum” both Ruth (1986) and Hodge (1981) see the two worlds as represented by Mrs Plum and Kate on the White side and Karabo and Lilian Ngoyi on the Black. The author is here noted by two critics on his presentation of the two worlds as implying that they are naturally estranged and as also having the impression of the divergent forces that continue to pull them apart. Viz: When Karabo is learning about the White world Kate tells her about the aim of Mrs Plum’s activity:

*So that a few of your people should one day be among  
those who rule this country, get more money for what  
they do for the white man (Ruth 1986:78).*

Karabo later learns from Lilian Ngoyi who, according to Hodge, is Mphahlele’s mouthpiece, that “a master and a servant can never be friends” (1981:35).

Contrary to assessments by some critics as outlined above, this dissertation seeks to prove the point it puts forth i.e. that Mphahlele should not be seen as a struggle or protest writer, as the close study of his work indicates that he (as a writer) transcends this category. For instance, as part of his assessment of Mphahlele as a struggle fanatic, Hodge (1981:41) observes that in most of the former’s fiction, White characters play either minor or secondary roles and appear in the background as just symbols of power. However, the character of

Steven Cartwright in **The Wanderers** (1971) as we will see, contrasts with this observation. Furthermore, **The African Image** (1974), Mphahlele's philosophical text, reflects his interest as much on the proper image building than on the "struggle" per se. This study finds its focus point on the literary distortions of character quality (from both sides of the racial divide) that characterized South African writing. Mphahlele admits to have condemned literature material that was used in "African schools" as it teemed with "distortions meant to glorify white colonization, frontier wars, the defeat of African tribes and White rule" (Mphahlele 1959:167). This meant negative attributes would be used to describe the "innate" characteristics of the colonized which were recognized only as a collective, e.g. "the Kaffir has stolen ..." (1959:167). The opposite would obviously apply on the side of the colonizer whereby all perfect attributes would be allotted to the latter by literary productions. In this regard the poets Leipoldt, Celliers and Totius are noted to have accentuated African "Savagery" and extolled Boer bravery in their poetry. Totius ostensibly constructed:

*"an image of his people as a persecuted race who,  
like the israelites, traversed miles and miles of desert  
to look for a canan and, in the process, to bring  
salvation to barbarians (Africans)" (Mphahlele 1974:132).*

The reference to the Afrikaners by Totius reflects the excessive praise of this

section of the population also as a collective. This implies that no imperfection may be part of this group and on the other side Blacks are portrayed as not having any good quality. This translates into the representation of improper images in respect of both Blacks and Whites (but the former's image is seen by Mphahlele as more distorted) in South African literature. Therefore, although not alien to the concept of "struggle" as having lived in a society where the system of living - "apartheid" (as imposed by the regime) was rejected by some sections of the population as illegitimate, Mphahlele, in his fiction neither protests nor mobilizes against the system. The fact that he refers to political issues in his autobiography and the philosophical work (which seems to have mislead most critics) doesn't necessarily make him a struggle/protest writer. On the contrary, his writings are perennially relevant as his views on character and representation thereof transcend the limitations of struggle literature. The analysis of character in the autobiography **Down Second Avenue** (1959) and **The Wanderers** (1971) in Chapter Three will prove this.

The theme of the study, which is the comparison of Mphahlele's creative writings in conjunction with his theoretical work, is targeted at exploring his concept of image building with characters. These texts seem to clearly demonstrate his concept of character which is expounded in his philosophical work. He argues in the latter text that various fiction writers in South Africa deconstruct character image through misrepresentation coupled with political and social subjectivity.

In tandem with the close association of Mphahlele's concept of character with other theoretical views as indicated above, his fictional works lend themselves to analysis in accordance with the contemporary theories on character. This signifies his theoretical view as worth investigating in terms of ascertaining its relevance and utility. In this regard, aspects of traditional, structuralist-semiotic, as well as postmodernist approaches to character have been found to be useful for an analysis of Mphahlele's depiction of character.

The significance he attaches to character as a human being converges with the traditional view that characters, although construed through words, sufficiently resemble real people for inter alia readers to be able to identify with, to evaluate their actions or to empathise with their fortunes or misfortunes. This fits in well with what appears to be his embedded interest in writing, i.e. the way "creative writers" view Africa "people and their condition" (1974:10). Mphahlele himself reflects that his emphasis on these issues which he regards as significant has E.M. Forster's blessings, whose development of the traditional view of character is widely recognized. These issues appear as strong subjects in both **Down Second Avenue** (1959) and **The Wanderers** (1971).

The notion of character as a human being and therefore the image that determines the extent of such humanity that Mphahlele emphasizes in his theory, doesn't get enough substance without the development of the structuralist-



semiotic aspect. According to Margolin (1986:206) the image that the reader forms of a character may be seen as a signified for which some textual elements serve as signifiers. This means the reader infers characteristics (e.g. wild, rough, violent-mostly associated with Blacks) or characterization statements about the character on the basis of information provided in the text about for example, the character's acts (e.g. she attacked Abdool (Mphahlele 1959:109) she was quick to use a slap on one's cheek, she would literally fling a man out who took much time before paying a debt for beer (Mphahlele 1959:76) or setting (Her shebeen was in a rough and violent slum area). These character qualities are either explicitly stated in the text or indirectly presented. According to Rimmon-Kenan (1983:59-61), it seems the textual sources of information about a character's properties consist of two basic types: (i) direct definition, consisting of explicit characterization statements made by the narrator about a character or by a character about himself or any other character and (ii) indirect characterization entailed, implied or inferable from textual data of various kinds, all of which Mphahlele sees as playing a significant role in determining or building the image of a character. In **The Wanderers** (1971) he uses much of indirect characterization, e.g. speech. The way Domingo speaks depicts his race and personality.

In postmodern approaches critics tend to define character in terms of what it is not as opposed to some tacit "norm" that is supposedly held in realist and

modernist literature. In this regard Margolin's (1989:9-24) proposal for a "dynamic structural model" which defines a character as a "non actual individual" appears essential. For instance, if a character is to be perceived as an individual distinguishable from other individuals or types, Margolin (1989:12) suggests certain conditions which include existence, identity, uniqueness and paradigmatic unity. The effect of coherence (which is one main convention distinguishing character in a realist text) would be enhanced if the character acted according to established rules of cause and effect. However, the manner in which postmodernist literature undermines the convention "of representational and coherent character with a psychological depth" (Fokkema 1991:59) seems equally significant to the way in which Mphahlele views depiction of character in South African literary works. The undermining of conventions takes various forms, which according to Fokkema involves the following: the portrayal of postmodern characters as fragmented, the subjection of character to language, replacing the convention of psychological depth with the concept of character, denying the character a "proper name" and replacing it instead with a set of impersonal pronouns. This view apparently supports the argument that a system of anonymous discourses rather than free individual characters constitutes the regulating force in the world of fiction (Fokkema 1991:64).

The nature and functioning of character in postmodernist texts will in this study be assumed to take into consideration the condition referred to above as required for

the identification of Margolin(1989) “non-actual individual” which may be regarded as a sliding scale favouring either the character’s embeddedness in or its detachability from the literary text. Fokkema (1991:36) considers both positions to be a necessary condition for a theory of character and they accordingly inform the semiotic model she proposes, which should enable a reader to determine the extent to which the postmodern character may be perceived to subvert conventions of representation or reflect contemporary cultural concerns such as the role of language/discourse. Mphahlele’s characterization approach in the two novels appears analogous to this theoretical stance.

## **1.2 OUTLINE IN CHAPTERS**

The dissertation consists of five chapters which are arranged in such a manner that the subject matter develops in a step-by-step form that progresses to resolutions and recommendations. The structure takes a funnel shape whereby the preliminary deals with broad theoretical issues which are developed into a sharper focus on Mphahlele’s characterization approach and style, which in turn leads to a more pointed end of resolution vis-à-vis his contribution to the literary character theory, as well as recommendations for further study.

In this first chapter an attempt is made to explain the value of this study. This involves investigation of a rationale about Mphahlele’s relevance in today’s

literary theory and apparent universality of his work. A comparison of his creative works with the theoretical writings in his philosophical text, **The African Image** (1974), appears inevitable, as his literary practice, centred in this study around the two texts **Down Second Avenue** (1959) and **The Wanderers** (1971), reflects his demonstration of how image building could be achieved as argued for in the philosophical work. The study also entails how Mphahlele's views on character representation lend themselves to analysis in terms of contemporary theories on character.

The second chapter concentrates on the different approaches to literary character. It is made clear in this chapter that theorists on character differ on certain concepts about character which may lead to them differing in theoretical approaches. For instance, the traditional theory accentuates the concept of a character as a real person, which accordingly makes it easier for the reader to understand the dynamics of this character. However, theorists in structuralist and semiotic studies reject the notion of identifying literary characters with flesh and blood beings, as according to them characters perform purely narrative and textual functions. Although not necessarily agreeing with the structuralists/semiotics, postmodern theorists also do not accept the traditionalist concept. They apparently recognize the character's rootedness in life, but on the other hand they argue against their being labeled humans. It is nevertheless discovered in this chapter that there are significant (though minute) threads that

render the theories complementary to one another. E.M. Forster's (1990) development of the traditional theory is viewed as one of the most significant threads and the one that Mphahlele heavily relies on as indicated in his philosophical work.

One of the central aspects of this study is character analysis in Mphahlele's creative writings (i.e. the two novels featured in this research) which is done in chapter three. This analysis engages Fishelov's (1990) and Margolin's (1990) revision of Forster's (1970) original typification of "flat" and "round" characters as a point of departure. Fishelov's view of characters as stereotypes in one sense and others being recognized as individuals is seen as one of the main features that characterize Mphahlele's narrative work. Characters in his literary works are found in various divisions of the continuum that reflect bipolarity of "pure" type and "pure" individual which Fishelov (1990:426) also identifies. With the former "pole" Mphahlele demonstrates the manner in which non white characters were depicted as stereotypes in South African fiction. One obvious example in this regard is the depiction of Indians as a fake merchant class. His skill in this portrayal is noted in a 'spiral' stereotyping that reflects stereotype characters stereotypically commenting on other characters. In the depiction of pure individuals, who in most of Mphahlele's texts happen to be the main characters, he has appeared to demonstrate the envisaged image of non-racialized characters.

Mphahlele's representation of character in his literary practice as reflected above is in chapter four compared to his theoretical ideas that emerge from his philosophy in *The African Image* (1974). The main object in this chapter is the investigation of the extent to which his philosophy can be traced in his literary works. Symbiosis in this regard is seen in the consideration of "people" in a novel as impacting on some further characterization aspects. Prominent amongst such aspects proves to be the fact that characters as "people" are direct products of living human beings, i.e. novelists, narrators and readers. As these operate from varied types of circumstances, premises from which character portrayal develops strongly influence the subsequent depiction that a character gets. Mphahlele's reference to different groups of people that feature in his writings indicates this. Such "peoples" include Africans, Whites, Coloureds, Asians etc (1974:14). The several different names used successively in history to refer to the same groups reflect such premises (as referred to above) as well as point to the consequent distorted portrayal. According to this philosophical text, Africans or Blacks have successively been known as Kaffir, Native and Bantu inter alia. Such titles would also be extended to mean "servant" or "slave" which could fit into a stereotype. As the ones who would command the activities of these "slaves", the whites would fit and live the quality of being slave masters. Literary reflection of such a division may influence conceptualization of types and individuals, since a writer would perhaps be able to recognize the individuality of the "people" of his own race whilst he sees the "others" merely as groups. The

two novels **Down Second Avenue** (1959) and **The Wanderers** (1971) accurately reflect this philosophy. This also reflects that even though **The African Image** (1971) was published after these novels and most of other works (by Mphahlele) the seminal role of this work to his literary practice should be recognized.

The last chapter features a synoptic review of the study highlighting pertinent issues that give this work a distinctive character. This in turn leads to a conclusive evaluation of character representation by Mphahlele. It is through this evaluation that the paradox that seems to exist between his philosophy and practice is further clarified. For instance, it initially appears strange that his condemnation of the stereotypic portrayal of characters (which he sees as characterizing South African literature) doesn't deter him from featuring stereotypes in his own fiction. However, it subsequently appears that for him to be able to convincingly present his criticism, it is necessary to demonstrate the issue as it is experienced not only in the literary but also in the social world. It also emerges that his initial deficiency in portraying the white character in the round is not necessarily based on attitude but on the scanty image he internalizes in his growing up in a racially divided country. This is proved by the fact that as he gets better exposure to the White world and maturer understanding of it, he achieves the ability to develop a White character completely.

## **2. DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO LITERARY CHARACTER**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTORY REMARKS**

Character representation in literary works appears to be a complex phenomenon which needs thorough studying for it to be well understood. In this section different approaches to literary character will be explored ranging from traditional approaches to postmodernist views.

The concept of characterization in the literature appears quite controversial as scholars in the subject (entertaining various theoretical conceptions) differ on some aspects. For instance, the traditional view of character holds that notwithstanding construal through words, characters resemble real people to such an extent that readers tend to identify with them and also evaluate their actions as if they were "living" people. This notion is rejected by structuralist and semiotic studies as these appear to emphasize function and textuality rather than person and psychological depth. It would seem that postmodernist theorists also criticise the traditional position, although for a rather different reason, in that they question "the coherence and unity of the self of the identity with the self with itself - and of the human subject as a viable focus of meaning" (Hochman and Wachs 1990:392).



In spite of the differing theoretical views on character certain theoretical threads seem to complement one another. This can be seen in the fact that although some theorists emphasize positions like the textuality of character or the fragmentation of the subject in poststructuralist theory, the traditional view that characters represent human beings, that novels are about people and that psychological motives sustain plots (Fokkema 1991: 18) appears to be regarded as also still relevant. Perhaps Forster's (1970) traditional development of this traditional view still presents a viable position.

According to him the actors in a story are human beings or they are projected as such. This makes it imperative to analyse the actors' relation to real life. However, he also hastens to note that it is above all the manner in which the character is portrayed by the author that can draw a line between novelistic characters and real people. The practical example Forster (1970) refers to gives a vivid picture, in that it shows how in contrast to real everyday life, people in a novel can be understood completely by the reader.

It is the novelist's decision to determine whether the reader will be exposed or not to the inner as well as outer life of characters. This total portrayal which includes exposing the "secret life" of fictional characters, also projects what theorists refer to as real character. The latter is explained by Forster (1970: 54) as that character that the novelist appears to know everything about. Such

information (about a character) may not be made readily available to the reader. However, in such a situation the author reveals to the reader that the character is explicable. The extent of character information dealt with in this regard goes beyond the real life knowledge of people about one another, where mutual secrecy is accepted as part of societal living.

## **2.2 CHARACTER AS A HUMAN BEING**

It appears a typically commonsensical view that a literary character does or should represent a real human being in a real life situation. This gets accentuated by theories of character which embrace human factors vis-à-vis the meaning making of the literary character. A notion arises from the study of traditional and structuralist theories that character comprehension depends on both the character's textuality and its resemblance to "actual" persons. The latter is the significant aspect in this section in that it is not only common but also an easy perception to see "human beings" in literary characters.

Character perception referred to above implies the manner of representation in literary works of art. The concept (of a literary character as a human being) is referred to as an "irrepressible ideal" in James (1984 a: 1322). Some theorists including Fokkema (1991: 19), suggest that the type of representation associated with fictional texts should be equated with painting, which is quite a

different phenomenon from producing a photograph or even a mirror image. This notion holds that whilst characters in a novel will always be rooted in life, they should however not be solely human duplicates. The author's role is here seen as intervention in - and interpretation of - rather than reproduction of reality. Such interpretation is meant to converge with nature and human appreciation (Fokkema 1991: 19).

What seems to blend art with reality is the common belief that human beings are prototypes for fictional figures. The fact that some authors reproduce the images of themselves in their fictional works illustrates this point. Others like Joseph Conrad openly admit that their characters are created out of their own substances (Ibid). Es'kia Mphahlele doesn't seem to acknowledge this, even though his literary works (other than autobiographical works) appear enormously inclined towards projecting his own image. This may not be literal but in a rather subtle manner his fictional products reflect the quality of being informed by his experiences.

Coupled with the characteristics mentioned above some of his literary works are also characterized by what can be referred to as his overreaction to his objection to grotesque African representation in South African literature. For instance the Black character appears as a butt for the wrath of Tant' Sannie, the Dutch woman of the farm in **The Story of an African Farm** (1975 ). Bonaparte, another

important person on the farm, appears just as spiteful, contemptuous and brutal towards the servants (which are only Blacks) as Tant' Sannie. As the latter believes that they were descended from apes and therefore salvation was of no significance to them, the African servants are not allowed to attend the Sunday/Church services on the farm(1975:62). Her contempt for Blacks is also reflected in what she tells Waldo about his father after the latter's death, viz.: "He had more sins than all the Kaffirs in Kaffirland" (1975:104). Mphahlele does not approve this kind of depiction, as he remarks in **The African Image** (1974:147). He feels strongly against such distortions as he says that one of the reasons he emphasises character is that "We remember people first when we think and talk about a novel - the characters that people it - sooner than its linguistic features" (Mphahlele 1974:11). The basic literary drive that seems not only to stimulate Mphahlele's literary production but also enormously influences his writing approach and style apparently leads to most of his characters being portrayed in approximate terms to real human beings if not as actual people. For instance the characters like Karabo in "**Mrs Plum**" and Naledi in **The Wanderers** (1971) are presented in a similar manner to Ma-Lebona in **Down Second Avenue** (1959) whose image approximates an actual human being. The first two can be seen in terms of the description "she's there" that Mphahlele uses to describe the latter. According to Africans when a person "is there" one cannot help but feel she is alive, she allows one no room to forget that she was born and is alive in flesh and spirit (Mphahlele 1959:47-48).

Mphahlele seems to have picked up some of his realistic tendencies vis-à-vis characterization from E.M. Forster. The latter refers to “human beings” or “people” rather than to characters in his character critique. This practice is apparently related to his entitling of a chapter on character as just “people” in his **Aspects of The Novel** (Forster[1927] 1970:30- all references from the 1970 edition). According to Forster’s critique characters are not only based on practical life but they also have peculiar lives. This means they should not be regarded as mere replicas of human beings or sub-humans to be used as pawns by narrative authors. The theorist sees them (characters) as engaged in living their own lives (other than the narrative’s), capable of getting out of the novelist’s control and ultimately even violating the major purpose of the novel, viz:

*They run away, they get out of hand; they are creations*

*inside a creation and often, inharmonious towards it.*

*If they are given complete freedom they kick the book*

*to pieces and if they are kept too sternly in check they*

*revenge themselves by dying and destroy it by intestinal*

*decay (Forster 1927: 46).*

Contrary to some authors’ view points which reflect portrayal of particular subjective views as well as readers’ biased responses to literary material, Forster’s development of the traditional theory gives a considerable measure of

autonomy to the readers. What appears as a general trend is that readers tend to put characters above plots. Whilst this has some advantages in the sense that readers tend to remember and even understand novels through characters, such an approach, however, carries with it a danger that would most probably have a negative impact on the autonomy of characters. The latter is nevertheless not so significant as the utilization of different types of characters for certain particular purposes by the novelists, which leads to the inevitable classification of literary characters.

### **2.3 TYPES OF CHARACTERS**

As already mentioned above, character significance in literature may be accentuated by the fact that the essence of a story/narrative often gets confused with characters or even characterization techniques employed. This tallies well with Mphahlele's view referred to earlier, that characters are the important reflectors of narrative. He apparently agrees with E.M. Forster in this regard, in that the latter also feels that it is through "the people in the narrative" that "we" are liable to recall its contents/the message conveyed (Forster 1970: 30). This is also reflected in the observation that certain characters perform in a manner that is traceable to certain patterns whilst there are those whose performance reflect complete uniqueness. Such a fact somehow makes it a focal point that response to literature involves strong consideration of characters, that is, to analyse their

motives, look at their portrayal and even identifying with some whilst criticising others.

### 2.3.1 FLAT-ROUND CHARACTER DIFFERENTIATION

The manner in which literary characters are portrayed and in particular the type of information the author would like to focus, apparently led to Forster's typification of characters as either "flat" or "round". In the strict sense of the word, according to the typology, flat characters are "constructed around a single idea or quality" and may even be summed up in a single phrase or sentence (Forster 1970: 75). A clear example in this regard can be seen in some of Charles Dickens characters. Mrs Micawber in Charles Dickens's **David Copperfield**, whose qualities are identified as typically flat. The character is apportioned a single line utterance i.e. "I will never desert Mr Micawber" that she sticks to as she communicates her feelings repeatedly. They appear sufficient for the reader to know and understand Mrs Micawber. This would also make it easier for the reader to predict future behaviour of such a character. Forster (1970: 77) notes that predictability and unchangeability that characterise flat characters make them easily accessible and well remembered.

Co-existence of flat and round characters is apparently inevitable in fiction. Forster (1970: 79) acknowledges this fact but commends Dickens who, through

depiction of types and caricatures, succeeds in achieving “effects that are not mechanical and a vision of humanity that is not shallow”. However, the creation and depiction of round characters is considered a more worthwhile literary achievement. As against two dimensionality of flat characters, round characters are portrayed as multidimensional, capable of undergoing change and having the potential to lead lives to the full. Novelists like Defoe, Jane Austen, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky are some of those who played a leading role in creating and depicting round characters in their literary works.

Forster’s differentiation between types of characters implies an evaluative appreciation. According to this the functionality of flat characters is limited to their simplicity and utility for successfully portraying comic effects. On the converse the round or multidimensional fictional characters are projected to be “fit to perform tragically for any length of time and can move us (readers) to any feelings other than humour and appropriateness” (Forster 1970:83). This quality is clearly reflected in Jane Austen’s portrayal of characters. In his study Forster refers to the readers’ readiness to identify with fictional characters and to see them as real people, as the characters themselves appear ready for an extended life, for a life which the scheme of her books seldom requires them to lead and that is why they lead their actual lives so satisfactorily (1970: 83).

In a slightly different approach from Austen’s as referred to above, Mphahlele’s



style features both flat and round characterisation: In **Down Second Avenue** (1959), this quality is, as in almost all his early works, most conspicuous. Regardless of the autobiographic status of this literary work, most of its characters are stereotypes. Some blacks are portrayed as savages (e.g. Moses), as rebels or saboteurs (e.g. Dinku Dikae, Zeph Mothopeng, Isaac Matlare and Eseki), whilst on the other side Whites appear as power wielders and oppressors. For instance, they are the ones who control all aspects of living of not only whites but also Blacks and other non white population groups. Their oppression is portrayed as targeted severely against Blacks, as criticism to the school syllabus (i.e. prescribed syllabi) for the Natives indicates (Mphahlele 1959: 167). Instances of flat characterization are also discernible in **The Wanderers** (1971) with characters like Diliza, Domingo and Munshi Ram (inter alia) even though some round depiction surfaces with some few characters, e.g. Timi Tabane and to some extent Steven Cartright. The first three above are apparently used to reflect the stereotypical perceptions of racial division and socio-economic misconceptions, whilst the latter (round characters) seem to represent the author's notion of desirable character image.

Mphahlele's initial reliance on flat characters in demonstrating his ideas apparently emerges from his feelings about what he describes as distortion of the image of Blacks in South African literature (1959: 107). He however commends some white writers who he recognises as having been able to

competently portray characters belonging to cultural groups outside their own. Amongst others he mentions, Joseph Conrad, E.M. Forster and William Faulkner (1974: 125). In his endeavour to teach African humanism, Mphahlele had to use characters that are simple which therefore were flat. Blacks whose portrayed image he aimed to improve also appear flat in most instances in his early works. Hence a number of characters (with the exception of the few main ones) is flatly portrayed in **Down Second Avenue** (1959). Such is the characterization that exemplifies this autobiographical text. His improvement at characterization in his subsequent fiction is notable. This development, however, initially reflects a quite pertinent limitation, that is, that of paying concentrated attention solely to black characterization. Although he at first doesn't seem to succeed in portraying black character in the round, as he apparently involves the latter mainly in protest reactions in his first literary works, he later on changes from this. This is also noted by one Critic in "**fiction by Black South Africans**". He comments that Mphahlele "has been moving in the direction of saying something positive about Black experience in South Africa instead of writing, as many of our writers do, as though everything the blacks did in the country was a reaction to White oppression" (Hodge 1981: 42). Karabo in "**Mrs Plum**" and Timi Tabane in **The Wanderers** (1971) can be referred to as examples in this regard, as they appear more dignified, sensible and capable of positive development than mere protesters. "Eseki", in **Down Second Avenue** (1959), also appears later on to develop this attribute.

The development of his characterization techniques to depicting fully developed Black characters doesn't immediately help him to achieve a similar standard with White character portrayal. Most of his fiction has been noted as depicting minor and secondary roles for white characters. He himself testifies to this.

*I used to worry that, because we see each other through a keyhole - we blacks and whites in south Africa - I cannot portray the character of a white man in the round. Often when I have turned the white stereotype round to look at it from another angle, I have tugged/pushed fiercely... I missed what I had thought I might find... to understand him. Over the last ten years I have ceased to care...If any critic tells me my white characters are caricatures... he is welcome to the opinion. (Mphahlele 1974: 14-15).*

Regardless of this position stated above Mphahlele has in some of his work produced white characters bearing round qualities. This somehow corresponds to the view by theorists who believe that the twofold import of flat and round characterization should be extended. For instance, as indicated above a character may develop from flat towards round depiction. Fishelov (1990) also introduces the concept of "Grey" characters i.e. "Type-like individual" and "individual-like type" . According to Rimmon-Kenan (1983) the term flat, on its

own, reflects a twofold meaning i.e. something lacking not only depth but also life as such.

It, then, sounds paradoxical that in close observation many so-called flat characters e.g. those of Dickens, like Pip and David Copperfield are not only felt as much “alive” but also reflect an impression of depth. The strictly dichotomised representation of character gives a discrete depiction and this may lead to the overlooking of other essential qualities of a character. It may also lead to misjudgement that a flat character is (always) both simple and incapable of development. Whilst these qualities are often seen to co-characterise a character, there may be exceptions in that there are fictional characters which are found to be simple but developing, the best example of which is “Everyman” (Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 40). Mphahlele’s Miss Pringle in **“We’ll Have Dinner at Eight”** seems to fall into this category, as her character develops well in spite of her simplicity(or flat qualities). Other characters may be complex but undeveloping.

A further study on character fills in the apparent gaps in Forster’s dichotomy. Here instead of a binary division Harvey identifies four types of characters viz.: protagonist, background, card and ficelle. In essence he develops the last two as the first two are equivalent to round and flat respectively. This four dimensional typology of character appears more complicated and closes the gaps

that are left open by the dichotomy. Unforeseen combinations of traits in a character are found in this this typology: i.e., relatively flat but vivid and realistic character is here classified as the card whilst a round but typical is taken to be ficelle (Fishelov 1990: 423).

At first glance the card and the ficelle seem to be diametrically opposed. However, it does appear that the fourfold typology lacks a fixed criterion of classification, thereby confusing one of the functions of characters within a novel and apparently trying to generalize on different types of characters. The continuum according to the broad functional criterion starts with a protagonist, followed by the ficelle in a subordinate role and then the background. Fishelov (1990) states that it is not clear where the "card" should fit in. He however notes that Harvey tries to squeeze "him" somewhere between the protagonist and the background not far from ficelle (Ibid.).

The distinction between the card and the protagonist appears so small that these characters are often confused with each other. Although the sharp demarcation between these may sometimes be blurred the essential distinction should remain. But because the card is free in his captivity "or equally captured in his freedom" the novelist can (in accentuating certain character qualities) frequently release through him a vividness, an energy an abundance that would submerge and obscure the more intricate contours of the protagonist. In some instances a card

is construed as also a protagonist. Don Quixote is seen as one quite obvious example in this regard. This collision aspect (of qualities of different types of characters) reflects some limitation in this fourfold classification.

Despite the chronological gaps and disagreements on issues that determine character attributes by the theorists as indicated above, the views on the subject contributed by Fishelov and Margolin seem to provide a more convincing evidence that appears relevant and therefore more useful in studying Mphahlele's representation of literary character. For instance in addition to his view on the "card" and "ficelle" (referred to above), Fishelov suggests a descriptive classification whereby it is possible to account for both the "typical" and the "individual" properties of fictional character. Looking at Mphahlele's range of characters (which is done in chapter three) his observation that the tension between "type" and "individual" is present in every character depicted in a literary work of art, seems valid. Development of Forster's (1970) original character typification of flat and round (which pervades in Fishelov's conceptualisation above) is perceptible in Margolin's view that the terms should be used to carry same contextual meaning of "simple" and "complex" as well "predictable" and "unpredictable" respectively. He even adds that a more substantive use of "type" and "individual" would incorporate both literary and social or psychological considerations (1990:464). This view could lead one to a deeper understanding of a character like Rampa in *The Wanderers* (1971), who

in spite of his severely limited education appears to understand some social and psychological realities of life.

### **2.3.2 STRUCTURALIST CHARACTER**

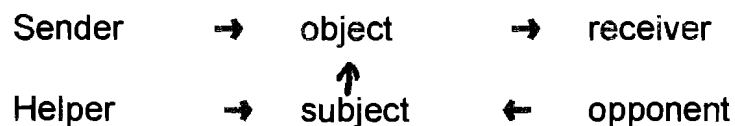
Contrary to the traditional character view, the structuralists tend to look at character as carrying only narrative function and express the feeling that this literary aspect should not be confused with humanistic qualities. This means that (according to structuralists) a character is meant to perform a certain ascribed role/s to provide meaning to the narrative. Propp (1968), an important predecessor of formalist and structuralist thought, identifies the following roles viz.: the Villain, donor, helper, "sought for person and her father" dispatcher, hero and false hero. However, he doesn't ascribe any role to any particular character or category thereof. That is, characters could differ in terms of the fulfilment of roles in different narratives. The example he gives translates to the fact that the hero, for instance, need not be a great figure or even a representation of an affluent background. The role can be played by quite a humble figure. The villain would range from a half-brother or sister to a dragon or a monster that is meant to be defeated by a hero mostly through mysterious means. This approach subjects character to the action it is meant to fulfil in the role assigned to it in the plot. Mphahlele doesn't seem to regard this approach favourably since (as we shall see) his fiction appears to have characteristics that would turn around the

envisaged order vis-à-vis the character and the action.

### 2.3.2.1 ACTORS AND ACTANTS

Structural theorists see the character in a narrative text as consisting of the elements of actors and actants, which according to them are major components. Greimas (1966) clearly distinguishes between the two aspects. He sees the former, which he originally calls “acteurs” as bearing specific qualities in different narratives, which means they can be multifaceted. On the other hand the latter aspect - the “actants” are equated with classes of actors linked by some common characteristics like playing similar roles in a story. This reflects one major difference between the two aspects i.e., actors - who are presented not only as human beings but may also include animals as well as inanimate objects, are as numerous as the tasks they perform and even as narratives themselves, whilst actantial roles are limited to six, viz.:

Figure 1



According to Rimmon-Kenan (1983: 35) the same actant can be manifested by more than one “acteur” and vice-versa. This quality closely resembles Propp's model.



An actant may undergo some qualitative semantic concretization according to Margolin (1989: 4). Such would turn the former into a role. This brings to the fore certain attributes through which character can be defined. These include standardised as well as stereotypical qualities which would go with the norms of action, expectations and values. The theorist distinguishes between literary stereotypes (the clown, fool, sentimental lover or suffering artist) and social/psychological models (the bored suburban house wife, retarded child, fanatic revolutionary or greedy stockbroker). Such a coupling of standardized properties with a social role may provide a clue to the text's ideology, as any individuation of the role-bearer may not be sufficient at any time and therefore likely to reflect an unreliable picture (Margolin 1989: 4).

What appears at this point is that reconstruction of character from its portrayal in the text as outlined above, may produce quite an incompatible "picture" with "diametrically" opposite elements. It could be either the construct resembles a human being or it serves to subordinate character to a particular function/role. Fokkema's (1991) observation that the functionalist view adhered to in structuralist narratology is inconsistent with the traditionalist view in that the former maintains that character is a narrative function and should not be confused with human beings, fits in neatly in this context. However, according to Rimmon-Kenan (1983) such incompatible views may be harmonized with the recognition that character and action are interdependent. Mphahlele's approach can be

closely compared to this although it includes additional elements of “speech” and “landscape”. On the other hand the subordinations of either action to character or vice-versa can be considered as relative to types of narrative. This apparently depends on the focal point in each case. Rimmon-Kenan sees reading as the significant determinant of action/character positioning. According to her characters may be subordinated to action when this is the centre of attention, but action can become subordinate to character as soon the reader’s interest shifts to the latter (1983:36).

#### **2.2.3.2 SEMIOTIC NATURE OF CHARACTER**

Semiotic theorists interpret character as a sign. As such a tag that identifies character i.e., a proper name, simulates signal in the text. However Weinsheimer (1979: 210), amongst others, notes that character shouldn’t in anyway be equated with the name. This makes it imperative for more information to be acquired about a character than just a name. But without that name or a substitute like a personal pronoun it is apparently impossible that a character can be conceived of. The proper name is therefore equated with the character/signifier, which therefore necessitates its recognition as a complete sign. In line with this Fokkema’s interpretation of a semiotic model reflects that character is not reducible to either the signifier or the signified but it should be understood as a sign (1991: 38-9).

The illustration referred to above reflects the similar agreement on the issue between Fokkema and Hochman who see character as being both embedded in and totally detached from a text. The former puts forth a semiotic model as a vehicle to achieve such a paradoxical relation. This apparently plays a significant role in integrating contrastive viewpoints of traditionalists (who maintain that a literary character is “lifelike”) and structuralists (believing that a literary character should be defined in terms of narrative function). Fokkema clearly describes the manner in which the character sign develops i.e., through a dynamic and complex process of signification which is “a combination and recombination of elements from the expression plane and content plane” (1991: 45). In this she seems to concur with Umberto Eco (1976) as she even borrows the explanatory terms from him.

The significant process referred to above is apparently influenced by codes (or conventions). The latter are observed as having either a literary or a referential basis. That is, in addition to literary conventions, there are conventions that are drawn from our knowledge and perception of the world. It then appears that readers draw from both types of conventions for character construction and therefore in the process - “readers, texts, and writers interact in a complex way” (Fokkema 1991: 47). This agrees with Margolin’s (1986) definition of literary character as a “non-actual” individual which agrees with the idea that though a character need not be seen in terms of an actual human being, the concept of the

sign should not be limited to the text, that is espoused by Fokkema in her description of a semiotic model (Ibid).

A quite critical aspect of the envisaged semiotic model appears to be the codes that are mentioned above. This can be confirmed by reference to Fokkema (1991: 73) who notes that the presence or absence of particular codes will condition the awareness of, for instance, the absence/presence of a psychological essence, coherence or even of fragmentation (in other words “our” reading of a character as a sign). This would also carry the implication of character interpretation as either representational or otherwise. It is then connotative codes that come to the fore as they appear as the ones through which the sign character is constructed. The denotative codes apparently do not feature in this regard as they appear restricted to the expression plane and reflect the impression that the sign character is restricted to primary signification on the surface (Ibid). It is then six codes (in the connotative realm) that Fokkema (1974-6) identifies as most utilized for signification of character. This investigation of traditional and structuralist views points to Fokkema’s (1991) profound proposal for the semiotic model to account for “postmodern character” in terms of a violation of one or more of the codes determining the reader’s construction of character.

In the first instance it is the “logical code” that appears to occupy the central part, since it concentrates on a differentiation between human and non human

character. The implication regarding this code seems to be that no one character can be portrayed in a bilateral fashion that simultaneously reflects extreme positions and capabilities of a character viz.: human and superhuman, man and animal or man and inanimate object. This is however sometimes violated and the portrayal takes the form (that is rejected by the code) that complies with what the novelist, wants to convey. The reference that is made to John Barth's short story (Ibid) appears a classic example in this regard. The "non existence" of the main character in the story, and that position dominated by an identical twin brother yields the bilateral effect referred to above and the situation bears some superhuman influence. Similar violations of the code appear to be common in fairy tales.

The code that seems to be observed as conventional in most narrative texts is the "biological code". It is a code through which a general mimetic effect is manifested in narrative production. In the process an impression is reflected that characters are the offsprings of "real" parents and it is their task to fulfil biological functions. Mphahlele's **Down Second Avenue** (1959) bears some instances of mimesis which seem to be channelled by the code. "Eseki"'s growing-up amongst his siblings and their relation with their parents including the extended family relatives around them appears mimetic and ties up closely with the code. Rare violations (of the code) are also experienced with some narratives where novelists apparently deviate from the code in order to achieve a particular effect. Zakes

Mda's **Ways of Dying** (1995) is seen as one of such narratives. In the narrative Noria's sons are strangely carried for fifteen months before their birth. Since the boys would normally have been born on the nine month, it is therefore the transgression of the "biological code" to have them born on the fifteen month and this suggests some abnormality with the parent herself. Her unconventional conception of the second "Vutha" coupled with her talent for motivating through singing, reflect superhuman qualities she is endowed with, which is tantamount to the violation of the "logical code". Such a violation reflects the proper and ultimate portrayal of the novel's main character.

Penetration into the "inner life" of a character by a novelist is guided by the "psychological code". A practical example of this code's application is in D.H. Lawrence's **Sons and Lovers** (1982) Paul Morel's inner self gets penetrated and controlled through his mother's intense love for him. However, this gets exaggerated to the extent that some kind of the violation of the code takes place. Mrs Morel's concern for her son, for instance, leads not only to control of the man but also to the total manipulation of his life. He finds himself in a situation whereby it is not sufficient to internalize his feelings but he has to externalize them for approval by his mother (Lawrence 1982: 95). Every love affair he has gets influenced by his excessive conscience to satisfy his mother which apparently leads to the waning of his internal desire. This makes him appear internally hollow as he is also observed by his girlfriend Clara, as "floating about in the wind"

(Lawrence 1982:119).

Stratification in society which is manifested through a number of ways e.g., wealth, race and religion inter alia is determined by a “social code”. Coetzee’s **Age of Iron** (1990) apparently gets meaning through application of this code. In this narrative an interesting classification is implied through taxonomic depiction of different characters, viz., Vercueil who is described as tall, thin, with withered skin and long carious fangs, smelly, filthy as well as homeless represents a class of derelicts. Elizabeth Curren who is the main narrator appears as a wealthy and privileged white liberal. With Thabane, Bheki and his friends one sees the under-privileged but vocal black masses. Their portrayal as violent Black youth and also as the victims of township violence emphasizes this perception, which reflects the code.

The novelists whose literary work is characterized by realist tendencies appear to be highly influenced by descriptive approaches. The latter helps a novelist to generate a realist portrait in describing a character’s appearance, clothing and/or mannerisms. Mphahlele’s style of characterization seems to be highly influenced by this code. This can be easily traced right from his first novel **Down Second Avenue** (1959), where almost all visible characters are given a full description. These include the paternal grandmother (Ezeki’s) in Maupaneng village, Moses, Eva, Aunt Dora, Kuzwi, Ma-Bottles, Big Eyes, Rebone, Rebecca and so on.

However, in the same novel it is rare that a white character is given a similar description. Most of such characters seem to get quite a shallow description. Such is notable for instance where he describes the proprietor of the law office "Eseki" worked for as a Messenger.

*... a tall forbidding colossus. A man I never again  
uttered a "Good Morning" to after trying a few times  
without success. Maybe it was because his ears were  
high above me: he never seemed to hear me  
(Mphahlele 1959: 136-137).*

The white girls that Eseki gets into contact with in the work situation are also described in the similar way, i.e.:

*I made tea and ran errands for the white girls who  
always seemed to think up something as soon as  
they saw me. They switched off their dictaphones,  
took up their handbags, scratched about inside  
with long red nails and sent me (Mphahlele 1959:137).*

This type of description seems to characterise most of Mphahlele's literary products. A slight difference is however notable with **The Wanderers** (1971)



where description appears substantial even for white characters. In this text the author uses different kinds of character definition in developing characters across racial lines.

One other characterization aspect of the semiotic model discussed above is the use of metaphor and metonymy which attaches significance to environmental and or external indicators of the narrative sphere of action. This would include open landscapes, crowded houses and halls or even stormy nights and bright moonlight nights. This code also seems to have some influence in Mphahlele's literary work. This is reflected in the way such external components are referred to in his works. In **Down Second Avenue** (1959) for instance, the physical description of Maupaneng Village conforms to the code. This includes metaphorical reference to the village as "a leech at the foot of the Mountain" (P.11), moonlight nights as equated to (or symbolising) "river fights" (P.13), Leshoana sands signifying the "Kgotlas" (P.15) and the Columbia Dance Hall apparently metonymic for the depressed and immoral way of living that characterized slums and townships of the early thirties (1959:88-94) inter-alia. The code traces can also be seen in **The Wanderers**. (1971). Such traces are visible in instances like the description of the Sekoting environment (1971:51) as well as Glendale Farm environment (ibid:69). It is then clear that Fokkema describes a set of codes where, amongst others, different transgressions apparent in postmodernist writing may be discerned.

## 2.4 READER FORMATION OF CHARACTER

Character formation in literature doesn't only rest with the author, but the reader is seen by some theorists as playing a significant role in this task. This is also reflected in the fact that character construction is said to take place not only at textual level where the author is supposedly dominating the task, but also at a constructed level (Fishelov 1990: 424), which appears to be the reader's domain. For instance some factors at textual level may reflect a certain impression about a character e.g., a "lifelike" image. This would come by when the character is encrusted (robed) with many traits depicted (sometimes) from varied view points, extensively described as well as dramatized in different situations. The constructed level goes beyond just involving linguistic references, literary techniques and different representation scales. It is characterized by the active involvement of the reader who constructs an image of a character that reflects on both the manner in which it is portrayed in the text and the reader's experience of the world.

The reader is apparently given a position of power by some theorists vis-a-vis character construction. This may also be influenced by the issue of the centrality of either the character or action at a particular time of reading. For instance, a character may have secondary significance as compared to action, that is when the latter is mainly focussed at. On the other hand, it is the reader's interest and

focus of attention that will elevate character to primary significance. Hence according to Rimmon-Kenan (1983: 36), different hierarchies may be formed in different readings of the same text. This also applies to particular emphasis at different points within the same reading.

In structuralist views character reconstruction from the text apparently involves determination of the essence and role of character on both textual and story levels. Different theorists reflect slightly different interpretations on this issue. For instance, Bal (1985: 79) sees a character as an actor only at story level whilst at textual level she/he appears "provided with distinctive characteristics which together create the effect of a character". On the other hand a rather technical definition is developed by Margolin (1986: 202). According to him a "character" or "person".

*"... designates a human or human-like individual, existing in some possible world, and capable of fulfilling the argument position in the propositional form Do (X) - that is, a Narrative Agent (=NA, to whom inner states, mental properties (traits, features) or complexes of such properties personality models) can be ascribed on the basis of textual data (Margolin 1986: 205).*

This definition agrees with Fishelov's (1990) perception that a detailed and diversified portrayal on the textual level could create an impression of a "lifelike" individual in the reader's constructed image of a character. However, Margolin (1986: 205) sees the reader's construction of a character from textual data as a complex process which involves two distinct features. In the first instance he identifies "characterisation" which is seen as the process whereby individual traits are assigned to a character. This is included in Bal's (1985: 36) definition cited above. Secondly, character building or portrayal is understood to be a featuring activity as it involves the ascription of complexes of traits to a character.

It can be deduced from the theoretical views discussed above that the reader's eventually formulated image of character yields a signified, for which some textual elements serve as signifiers. The reader is put in a position where she/he has to infer characteristics (e.g., compassion, gentleness etc) or even characterisation statements (like "she is a kind person") about the character on the basis of information provided in the text regarding the acts of a character. The characteristic/characterisation statement just cited above and even similar ones e.g., "She likes children", can be simply deduced from the broader one, i.e., "She started a soup kitchen to feed the street children and homeless on a regular basis". Such a deduction may apply to other aspects like physical appearance; "She had a motherly figure", and setting, which can be inferred from "the small kitchen was warm and clean and bright, a veritable refuge against the biting wind

outside" (Margolin 1986:206).

The second order activity is seen by Margolin (1986: 205-206) as that part of character building which consists of a succession of individual operations of characterisation. This is apparently characterised by continual activities of patterning and re-patterning of the traits identified in the first order operation. According to him the activity should proceed "until a fairly coherent constellation or trait paradigm has been reached/achieved".

The previous procedure is described lucidly in Rimmon-Kenan's (1983: 36-40) analysis of character building and it is highly recommended by Margolin (1986: 206) for the reader's understanding of literary character. The former suggests that the construct called "Character" should be seen as a "tree-like hierarchical structure in which elements are assembled in categories of increasing integrative power". According to the analysis, rudimentary patterns are formed by linking two or more items within a unifying category. This is illustrated by a character's daily visits to his mother which may be combined together with his daily quarrels with her, out of which a generalisation can be drawn to reflect "X's relations with his mother". Such relations may moreover be qualified as "ambivalent". The formation of a higher category happens when X's relation with his mother is added to a similar generalisation about his relations with, for instance, his wife, colleagues, friends etc., and that can be broadly generalised as "X's relation with

people” .An all embracing category is yet further identified by Rimmon-Kenan. This is formed when a combination with other aspects of the similar order of generalisation is taken into consideration, like “X’s world-view, manner of speech, actions etc.” (Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 37-38). The cited example also reflects potential influence that could be exerted by “non-character constructs” which include the work’s ideology, style or manner of action.

What seems ultimately significant in the theorist’s ideas discussed above is that the reader should realise the importance of the roles played by different types of characters in literary works. The reader is also looked at as an important character formation link. Therefore his/her function to interpret the evidence provided on the textual level in order to better understand the nature and representation of character in fictional works is particularly essential. This agrees with Mphahlele’s approach as he apparently also uses different types of characters highlighted in this chapter. His view on the significance of a literary character as the substance of a literary text is as indicated above shared by a renowned scholar like E.M. Forster as well as Fishelov who develops the original bilateral typification of character in a more sophisticated taxonomy. This apparently informs Mphahlele’s approach to literary character as characters in his novels are subject to a particular form of classification. It therefore appears possible to use Fishelov’s (1990) model in the analysis of Mphahlele’s characters.

### 3 ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTER IN **DOWN SECOND AVENUE (1959)** **AND THE WANDERERS (1971).**

#### 3.1 DISTINGUISHING CHARACTER TYPES

The building of the image of Blacks that is developed through struggle literature (which apparently dominates Mphahlele's writing) which also appears in both the autobiographical and the fictional literary make up, appears to form a link not only between the autobiography, **Down Second Avenue (1959)** and the novel, **The Wanderers (1971)** but also with the more philosophical work, **The African Image (1974)**. Such a convergence would apparently be clearly conceived of in the consequent character image(s) of the various social and racial groups as presented in the (fictional) texts, which can be expected to correspond to the philosophical ideas about the encompassing "African image" exhibited in the philosophical text. It is then mainly through the characterization techniques that "character" in the autobiographical and narrative texts will be investigated.

The task outlined above, it appears, can be appropriately approached by focussing on Fishelov's (1990:426) four-fold taxonomy of characters as a logical starting point. His view of the reader having to think of characters as stereotypes in one sense whilst at the same time recognizing others as individuals, seems to be reflected in Mphahlele's narrative work. Characters in the two texts seem

to fall in various categories of the continuum that exists between the two poles of “pure” type and “pure” individual distinguished by Fishelov (1990:426).

In the analysis below familiarity with Fishelov’s (1990) and Margolin’s (1990) revision of Forster’s (1970) original typification of “flat” and “round” characters will be assumed. (See chapter 2 sub-section 2.3.2.1). Important for our purposes is Fishelov’s elaboration of type and individual on the levels of text and construction and Margolin’s distinction of types that may point the reader to both literary and social stereotypes.

Margolin demonstrates this bilateral character quality by explaining that a “type” may reflect a literary character which comprises either a recurrent literary pattern, a stereotype or even a social/psychological model that exists in a society’s understanding and which supposedly represents comprehensively, widespread qualities that are found in human society. The example he gives in this regard sufficiently clarifies his point ; the clown, fool or sentimental lover would correspond to the former, whilst the examples vis-a-vis the latter include a retarded child, fanatic revolutionary and a greedy stock-broker (Margolin 1990:464). This demonstration bears some salient features that correspond to characterization elements emerging from the two novels under consideration. For instance, although literary stereotypes do not appear in the latter in the same sense as suggested by Margolin (1990) they do emerge in a manner which would



justify referring to them as struggle literature stereotypes. An example in this regard is Zeph in **Down Second Avenue** (1959:147) who is introduced to the reader when he meets with the narrator at Adams College. His activism is commented upon and noted to have characterized him as early as when he was a secondary school student at St. Peter's.

At Adams college the narrator notes that he still has "his old fire" (ibid:147). This is accentuated by his expulsion from the college together with three of his colleagues for openly challenging and reacting to the "exclusive reservation of seats" for European members of staff at a college function. A sequel to this is his dismissal from his post as a teacher at Orlando High School for campaigning against the recommendations of the Eiselen Report, which he and his comrades severely criticized. Clearly, then, and not surprisingly so, our "struggle literary stereotype" is characterized through actions in which authority is repeatedly challenged. His behaviour remains predictable, as even at this stage (i.e. when he is a teacher) the narrator sees him as "still the fiery person he was when he paced up and down in his mine boots on St. Peter's stage during their high school days (1959:168).

Diliza in **The Wanderers** (1971) also appears to reflect the kind of stereotype that characterizes Zeph. However, he is characterized rather more through words and his ability to untiringly criticize the system than through actual deeds. In Timi's

first encounter with him about Naledi's husband, he presents himself in such a pompous manner that urges Timi to take the challenge . Even during this time Diliza still sticks to his conviction that as long as the system is rotten, the Bongo's exposures would not be of any practical value. That this would always be translated to political terms, can be seen in his conversation with Timi, where he would outrightly state that it would be "of no political value" (1971:19). He, however, needs Timi to handle the task as he recognizes the latter's skills in journalism but he appears less interested in a story for their "pinup rag", as he criticizes the story material in the Bongo magazine as "chaff" (1971:126). This is ultimately what it turns out to be. Although Diliza appreciates the job done by Timi ( in his search for Rampa) he seems to have serious reservations about the magazine story on the issue and challenges Timi about it. In their argument he stresses the fact that in his opinion, until a strong nationalist paper is established, a paper around which the masses can rally, all else is futile, a waste of time and money and can even be poisonous (1971:125). In this he includes Timi's political stories which he regards as lacking the necessary vigour since they appear sandwiched between advertisements and the other chaff.

Diliza's strong political conviction that he would display whenever engaged in conversation with Timi amongst others would at times cause Timi to pause and reflect on Diliza's political affiliations. This would also be triggered by his loud and bold remark: "I am a nationalist to the marrow" (1971:25). As it could be

expected of him to belong to one of the radical political movements, Timi marvels at the fact that he never joined any of these organizations. One may infer, here, that Timi suspects him of paying lip service only to the ideal of the struggle. This points to Diliza's criticisms and at the same time his lack of action and would explain why he is mainly characterized through his speech rather than his deeds. However, Diliza appears to have a ready response to this issue which reveals his bloated regard of himself but also his ability to pinpoint stereotypes in the struggle with whom he does not wish to be associated: "I can't allow myself to be led by numbskills, compromisers, adventurists," (1971:25). His extreme nationalist quality re-emerges later when he tries to 'protect' Naledi from her closeness to Steven Cartwright viz: "None of your smart talk!... Take your white paws off Naledi" (1971: 166). This slightly "individualistic" stereotype is used by Mphahlele apparently to foreground the struggle that leads to differences between blacks and whites. It may also reflect the idea that due to oppression by the Whites, Blacks may also develop similar racial attitudes, like Diliza's anti-white mindset.

As we have seen, the political activists described above appear so frequently as characters in so-called struggle literature that they may be labelled "struggle stereotypes". Margolin's (1990:464) recognition of the stereotype imbued with psychological traits or epitomizing a social role certainly seems applicable to the characters in Mphahlele's writing. For instance, besides the "fanatic revolutionary"

stockbroker”, in the guise of an Indian shopkeeper, for example, in the texts under consideration.

### 3.2 CHARACTER PORTRAYAL

Mphahlele’s portrayal of minor characters in his literary text seems to reflect the broader pattern that he sees as characterising South African literature and fiction. For instance, an Indian stereotype in terms of the manner in which they are perceived in South Africa emerges from their portrayal in both **Down Second Avenue** (1959) and **The Wanderers** (1971). Every time his narrator refers to a kind of a retail business in town outskirts or even township areas, it is owned by an Indian, to the extent that such enterprises may be regarded metonymic vis-à-vis the Indian people. Abdool, the Indian shopkeeper in Marabastad ( in **Down Second Avenue**: 1959) is portrayed, through his actions and speech, not just as a shopkeeper but as an avaricious one. The accolade system he uses to encourage customers, gets severely challenged by “Aunt” Dora due to his own defaulting as he tries to minimize its cost. This leads to a fierce fight between the two (1959:108). The incident is comparable to what is done by “Chipile”, who is a hawker of soft goods, but also an Indian. He would sell goods on credit for Aunt Dora who wouldn’t pay her dues. However, due to his patience and steadfastness regarding money matters he seems to have been capable of

pestering her until she pays, so he would again give her goods on credit whilst he would be encouragingly remarking "*I know you pay sister*" (1959:77).

Munchi Ram is presented in **The Wanderers** (1971), as a big business man with a number of shops in various places. His greediness is foregrounded in his conversation with Timi which takes place when the former comes around for the collection of rent. With this deliberation the narrator alerts the reader that Munshi Ram's strictness always proved inconsistent with the fulfilment of his obligations as the landlord. This is why Timi resorts to threatening him that if he does not fix the cistern of the lavatory, he would take further steps which include reporting the matter "to the city's public health people" (1971: 32). The fact that Munshi does not forget to collect the rent but needs a push to repair wear and tear of the houses he rents out, coupled with the fear he has about their businesses (as Indians) that seemed to be threatened by "some hoodlums", (whom he assumes to be Africans (1971:33), characterize him as the Indian stereotype that the text reflects. The tone of their conversation is clouded with gloom as Munshi shows resentment towards blacks as he holds them responsible for the burning down of shops owned by Indians, which reflects another racial stereotype.

He sees other racial groups as envious of them as Indians as they are capable of making much money. He divulges his bitterness to Timi: "You people hate us Hindians... you hate us because we wo'k wery hard... and you know we'll always

Hindians... you hate us because we wo'k wery hard... and you know we'll always have more money than you peeple" (1971:33). His depiction like those of Chipile and Abdool in **Down Second Avenue** (1959) closely relates to Margolin's (1990:464) example of a "greedy stockbroker ". It is apparent from the elucidation above that the line of separation between literary stereotype and social or life-world models may not be the same in different circumstances and in some instances appear blurred.

What also emerges from the example above, is Mphahlele's technique of using minor characters to occasionally comment on other characters. In this instance, instead of the narrator, as an intellectual black man, filling in the reader on the Indian stereotype, it is the latter, although a relatively minor character never allowed to develop into a "pure" individual, who voices his perspective of the black "stereotype". By using both "minor" and "major" characters to depict other characters and to define types, Mphahlele's characterization of social and racial stereotypes is perceived by the reader as both subtle and convincing. Having established the co-existence of types and individuals amongst the characters in the texts under consideration, we shall now endeavour to categorize the characters, using Fishelov's (1990) diagram as our frame of reference.

The two levels for determination of character depiction identified by Forster (1970:75), i.e. "flat" and "round", are developed by Fishelov(1990:425) to the

determination of different levels of a text at which different qualities of characters are foregrounded, viz. "textual" and "constructed" levels. This means that a character who gets a flat portrayal at textual level may be given round attention on the constructed level and vice versa. The former level (textual) may be identified through various factors operating to inter-alia create "the impression of a lifelike character", which is achieved when a character is given many traits, portrayed from varied points of view, described extensively as well as dramatized in different situations. This being orchestrated from the author's own initiatives (literary techniques) renders the character a lifelike creature. The constructed level on the other hand seems to depend on the active involvement of the reader who is expected to "construct" an image of character as based on the manner in which it is portrayed in the text as well as on his/her experience and knowledge of the world. Then categories of character that appear in Fishelov's model are applicable Mphahlele's **Down Second Avenue (1959)** and **The Wanderers (1971)**.

The following chart, which shows how the categories of flat and round character aspects are combined with the textual and constructed levels, is adapted from Fishelov (1990:426).

**Figure 2.**

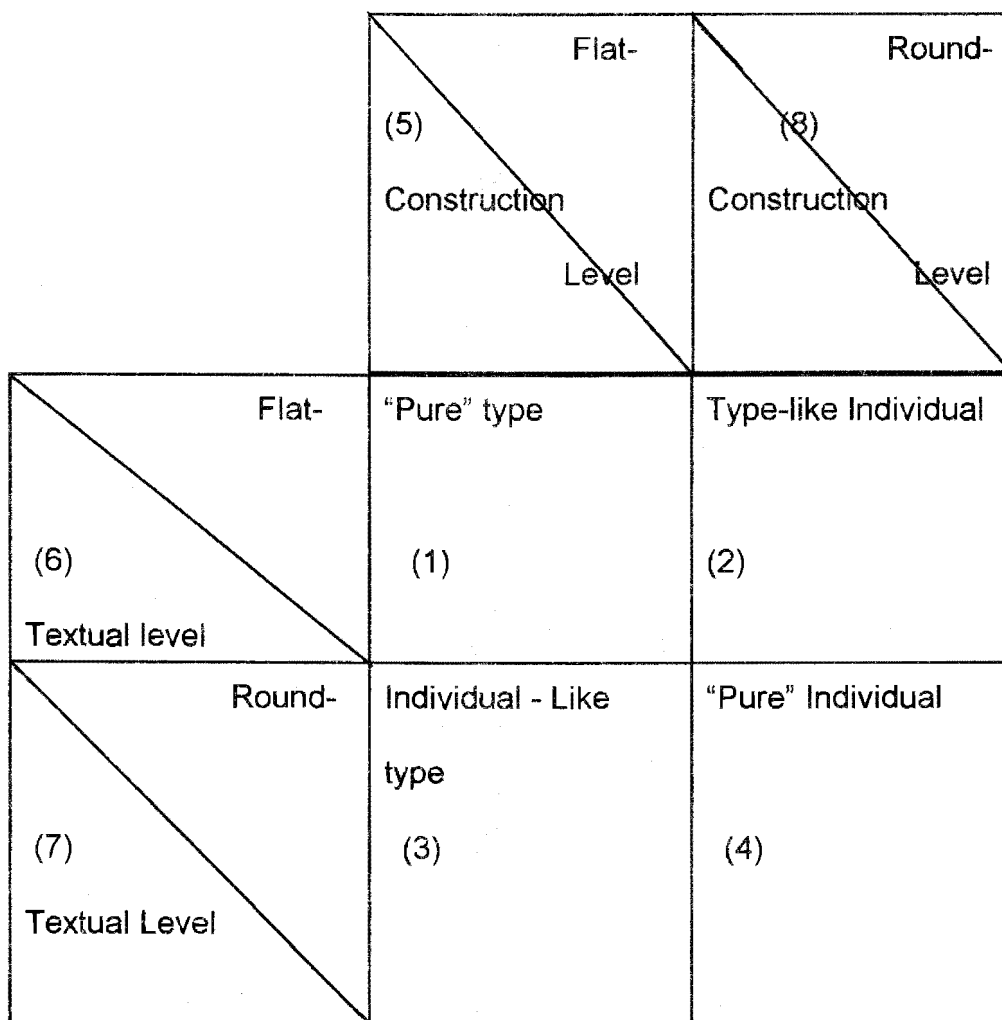


Figure two above mainly features four types of characters that are found in literary texts, i.e. "pure" types, type-like individuals, individual-like types and "pure" individuals. Mphahlele's characters in the two novels will then be examined according to these features. The process will also take into consideration the four parameters as suggested by Fishelov (1990:426).

Different numbers are attached to the various blocks of the chart referred to



above. These numbers are not meant to carry any numerical value vis-à-vis the chart other than just to differentiate between the blocks so as to aid the explanation. A close look at the chart would for instance note that block one appears next to both block five and six. This means that a character that belongs to this block is said to be both textually and constructionally flat. The former is according to the theorist, the quality of a character that is depicted from only one dimension in the text. This will be the only trait for him/her that is foregrounded.

In the second instance a character would reflect some simple category (e.g. moral, social or aesthetic inter-alia) into which he/she would fit after construction of data from various levels of the text which include dialogue, description, action, environment and the like. Characters like Ma-lebona, Aunt Dora and almost all white characters in **Down Second Avenue** (1959) fall into the category of block-one. Each of these characters reflects a single dimensional being. Ma-lebona's personal qualities for instance seem to be wholly depicted in one short phrase by the narrator i.e. "She's there" (1959:59). In terms of Forster's original categorization, and in accordance with Fishelov's categories, we might think that she is a "pure type". However as will become clear from the discussion, the situation is a bit more complicated. Mphahlele's elaboration on this quality pointer gives in a nutshell the character's one dimensional being:

*When Africans say a person 'is there' they mean you  
cannot but feel she is alive she allows you no room to*

*forget she was born and is alive in flesh and spirit*

*(Mphahlele 1959:59).*

Her foregrounded trait is based on her apparently ideal conception of a mother-in-law, which according to her impressions, other women (both mothers-in-law and their daughters-in-law) in the township are oblivious of. It is most probably on this basis that she would take long lounging strides from one house to another in Marabastad's Black slums thrusting advice down the throats of men and wives" (1959:59). In such visits she would expectedly propagate what she believed to be the hallmark of a mother-in-law including the "great duties" and great ideas that have to characterize the latter. "Good" qualities of a daughter-in-law obviously formed big chunks of her "lecturers" Ma-lebona's 'flat' qualities also surface in her apparent regard of herself as a model woman. This ranges from cleanliness, cooking, to child rearing. The narrator also remarks on her obsession with cleanliness. According to these none of the three rooms she occupied (of the six roomed tin shack she owned) and the stoep was to be left dirty too long in the morning. Such a cleaning activity could be done only on her terms and if not she wouldn't approve. She, for instance, could be heard talking to her daughter-in-law, Anna- "No, child, that stove is not clean..." (1959:64). This would also instruct to have meat taken out of boiling water to be rewashed. The narrator describes her as having been "as clean as a cat in a white man's house" (1959:64).

She would not forget to “advise” young mothers to take their children out more often. In her own days she used to take Joel to tennis, where he waited in his small cart while the mother played tennis this way and that, she would tell them. When she talked tennis she exaggerated her “flat” aspect of character as she unwarrantedly would speak English “as much as she could remember of it, to the total dislike and contempt of many older folk” (1959:60). Her obsession with goodness extends to the education she got exposed to as a young adult and the type of profession she followed. Almost every woman in the township knew that she had once been a schoolmistress, trained at Kilnerton Institute, as she often said this in most instances when talking to the women either individually or as a group. viz: “when I was a schoolmistress...” (1959: 60). This would differentiate her (from the other women) as better enlightened, which convinced her to be indeed better hence justified to offer advice to the others. From the presentation above it is rather clear that Ma-lebona’s character is not confinable to one category i.e. block- one. Some of the advice she would give to others e.g. taking the children out to parks and playing grounds by the parents as well as the manner of house cleaning (including cooking) by her daughter-in-law, identify her as a type-like individual.

Ma-lebona appears to have much in common with Aunt Dora. The qualities common between them entail being women of the African background and also an assertiveness that portrays them to have strong personalities. However, this

characteristic assertiveness points to different aspects of their personalities, viz; morality and perfection on the part of the former and the chucker-out quality of the latter. This quality ( of the latter) is reflected upon by the narrator as well as demonstrated through various means by the character herself . The narrator describes her as a tough thick -set woman who due to her easily aroused temper ,would not hesitate to use a clap on one's cheek when irritated .A true shebeen queen character is demonstrated by her through a sharp tongue and her ability to literally fling a man out who would take long before paying a debt for beer. Her quality as township rough woman is apparent in her confrontation with Big Eyes for caning "Eseki" as he one day could not attend choir practice due to the errand he had to run for his aunt i.e. fetching washing from the suburbs (1959:84), as well as in her fight with Abdool for the latter's refusal to give a purchase accolade (through stamping a purchase book ) that he promised to give with each purchase (1959:108).The attributes referred to above (about Aunt Dora) which comprise major characteristics of character, describe her as noted by her family members i.e. a "chucker out", which points to a one perspective depiction. Fluidity of some of her qualities, e.g. her individual respect for other people like her husband, would also portray her as a type-like individual.

Almost all white characters in **Down Second Avenue** (1959) appear both textually and constructionally flat. Only one facet of their personalities is foregrounded. For instance the proprietor of a law office where Eseki works after

passing Junior Certificate is depicted as a 'monster'. The man never responds to his messenger's (Eseki's) greetings, let alone greeting the latter himself. This generates fear in the messenger to the extent that an inhuman type of relation between the two results. The personal qualities of the proprietor that the narrator comes up to enumerate tend to accentuate the monster image of the former. This includes his identification as a "scrooge" and "as a machine that generates power" (1959:137). The latter analogy is complemented by Eseki's fear which is expressed through trembling whenever executing his tasks in the office, like cleaning the ink pots and the large glass on the proprietor's table. All the identified characteristics pertaining to this character seem to point towards one image, i.e as a "monster" as referred to above.

A number of other whites that Eseki comes in contact with in work situation get the all embracing depiction of superiority fanatics. This ranges from the white girls (who worked in the offices as either clerks or typist ) who always seemed to think up something as soon as they would see Eseki whom they regarded as not only their tea-boy or messenger but their errand boy too. He recalls this with apparent concern about such a superiority complex :

*They switched off their dictaphones, took up their handbags, scratched about inside with long red nails and sent me on some private mission*

(1959 :137 ).

The impression reflected in this concern seems to be the fact that the white supremacy (referred to above ) which was racially determined would be used by some whites as not only a controlling but also a comfort gaining mechanism. This in turn would characterize them as whites.

The characters belonging to block one in **The Wanderers** (1971) include Diliza, Domingo as well Munshi Ram. Portrayal of these characters appear inclined towards one facet of the practical life of each. For instance as mentioned above, Diliza's presentation gives the impression of a nationalist. This is reflected in the confidence he seems to have in Timi as opposed to "white" police for the search of Naledi's husband. He doesn't trust the police with the matter as he seems to be of the opinion that the racial factor would render it trivial in their hands. Patriotic nationalism appears to be the only quality that characterizes his personality initially but this extends to chauvinism as his character unfolds (which is merely the extreme form of the same quality). His objection to being led by what he refers to as the "numbskulls" in political movements and his hatred of whites appear to be tangible evidence of such prejudice.

The other two characters' (i.e.: Domingo and Munshi Ram) single dimensional appearance is reflected in their respective representation of their own typical

racial groups. The former's characteristic traits seem to be confined to Domingo's narrow minded perception of life, viz. that the different races should live separate from each other as no one needs what belongs to the other. His being content with the fact that "brown people" remain superior to "black folks" seems the significant part of this perception. In the latter case Munshi Ram's living is apparently limited to the confines analogous to Margolin's (1990:464) example of a greedy stockbroker, which is the quality generally associated with the Indian folks as indicated with the character types. The wicked aspect of whites (which accentuates their appearance as types) does to a certain extent, get representation in **The Wanderers (1971)** through McDonald who is said to have shot one of the farm workers and buried him, without being charged by the government (1971:83).

Makatona himself together with other farm owners are portrayed as black labour exploiters, with the revelation of Glendale farm atrocities. Through these incidences typical qualities of such whites are foregrounded, which would fit them in block one. These features characterizing the wicked quality of white farmers seem not to get the same far reaching prominence as the one ascribed to whites in **Down Second Avenue (1959)**. This can perhaps be ascribed to Mphahlele's better understanding of the White world and therefore improved depiction of White characters in his novel **The Wanderers (1971)**.

Characters like Eva and Rebone in **Down Second Avenue (1959)** apparently belong to block two. Although these characters are portrayed to reflect some typical qualities at textual level, the reader's reaction to some extent may yield an untypical flavour so that they are experienced as type-like individuals. Eva's initial response to her husband's irresponsible conduct for instance, does render her a typical township woman. She resorts to brewing and selling beer in order to augment her income as the whole family's budget rested on her shoulders. Beer selling is a typical township business. Tired of tolerating the burden she would venture to directly challenge Moses which is the route usually used by the "Chucker-out" like aunt Dora, viz:

*How long do you want this to go on Moses?...*

*Don't pretend you don't know I need money for food...*

*Just look at you, drunk as always. What are you  
standing up for? (1959:25).*

However, through dialogue, description and action, it appears that Eva's character has an untypical aspect. Although she would burst out uncontrollably at times as indicated above, she is also described by the narrator as a quiet person who due to this would even sometimes be taken advantage of by her own sisters through using her utensils without her permission (1959:80). In spite of the abuse inflicted on her by Moses she still cares for him. This can be deduced from



the narrator's comment: "She never left my father to go anywhere in dirty clothes" (1959:26). Her attempts to prevent the children from being affected by their quarrels is one other quality that reflects her uniqueness and individuality.

Rebone also reflects typical characteristics at textual level operation. These emerge in spite of her initial individual appearance, which inter-alia links with her unusual gift of drawing friends to herself without crawling for them as she arrives in the new school (1971:57). However she leaves school in the middle of her standard six year and apparently getting frustrated she degenerates into a Marabi dance girl (prostitute) of the Columbia dance hall. This earns her a bad reputation not only amongst her young admirers, like Eseki, but also with the elderly folks throughout Marabastad as revealed by the township gossip and her subsequent clash with Ma-Lebona over the issue. This notwithstanding, it also appears that it is with good intentions that Rebone leaves school i.e. to help her father with his business. It appears she worked really hard at this task with the result that sufficient money from the business got saved to later see her through her studies. From the time she met with Eseki at the primary school they had been close friends, with the exception that she would never agree to a love affair. This differentiates her from the 'Marabi dance' girl type she earlier seems to be. In this regard she seems identifiable as an individual who is capable of restraining her feelings in order to preserve their significant friendship. A letter to Eseki shows this.

*...baffled by a long letter from Rebone telling me how passionately she loved me, that she had known it all the time, that she couldn't face a love affair with someone she had got used to as a school and a playmate (1959:154).*

This individuality is recognised by Eseki who also confesses that although he married Rebecca, Rebone remained a lingering memory to him of what would have been, which he likens to an ornamental lace; "like the lace a petticoat which is all right as long as it doesn't show" (1959:155).

Timi's wife Karabo and Rampa in **The Wanderers (1971)** seem to also belong to block two. The former responds in a somehow jittery manner initially to Timi's notification that Steve would like him to follow-up Rampa's search. This cannot be unexpected of any woman who would naturally think of her husband who has to travel countless miles through farms of cruel owners who could do anything to him, if they would suspect him to be on a fact finding mission, to hide their cruelty from the public. She could be expected to worry even more when considering the fact that her husband has to travel and stay-over in a far-off village for a number of days with a beautiful woman like Naledi who doesn't have a husband. Her response to Timi's suggestion to back-off (1971:48) however is to some extent untypical. Her feeling that Naledi anyway has to know what happened to her husband reflects generosity as it implies that if that has to be followed up by her

husband, then let it be.

Rampa's disappearance and his cohabitation with a woman at Sekoting is a typical migrant worker practice, as the man would stay for a long time away from his own wife and family. But the manner in which he tries to leave a trail for Naledi when he realizes that his death is imminent, i.e. writing a letter and giving his hosts things like Naledi's photograph for them to know her if she may come by, is rare and untypical. These characters then may be experienced as "type-like" individuals.

A character like Dinku Dikae in **Down Second Avenue** (1959) apparently features in block three of the figure. He appears to get some rich attention on the textual level, viz. His description produces a positive image, i.e. "strongly built with broad shoulders and a blacksmith's arm" (1971:57). The association of his voice with the echoes in the mountains of Maupaneng accentuates the resonant manner in which he is represented as a character. His killing of a white policeman (1971:141) and remaining bold and strong to tell the truth as it is, is perhaps indicative of this. Although the above is true of the character, it is nevertheless possible to summarise him in a typical way, that is his being (or personality) could also be equated with his intense phobia of both police and whites, which he considered to be the same.

Papa Dzivane in **The Wanderers (1971)** appears to be one of the characters identifiable with block three qualities. His portrayal at textual level reflects a “calm” resigned and dignified individual. This is partly reflected in his calling to order (in a mature way) of other farm workers whom Timi lends binoculars to look through, using foul language to express what they can see through the instrument, viz; “do you think you can see Van Zyl pissing”,

*“... I can see Chill’s sharp buttocks behind  
the bush!” the other one “Hela Makatona is on top  
of his wife for his lunch!” (1971:98).*

All this immediately stops when Papa Dzivane intervenes- “shut your mouth ;” they heard him saying “go and wash your mouth with cattle dip”(1971:98). They immediately take heed of his admonition, as no one utters a word after this, instead they go for their lunch. On the other hand he is regarded just as one of the “boys” by the farm owners, but the only difference is that they see him as an “old boy” on the farm and he doesn’t seem able to challenge this. His typical characteristics are then also foregrounded.

Block four features those characters that are depicted in more detail as individuals. The character that belongs to this category in the autobiographical novel is Eseki, the first person narrator who is also the main character of **Down**

**Second Avenue (1959).** His portrayal through-out the novel reflects a strong personality that enables him to resist social and environmental pressure that tends to corrupt most other characters. For instance even though Eseki went through all experiences that any country boy would encounter ,some\most of which were awful like catching stray pigs and killing them for meat. eating flying ants, hairy tree worms or wild spinach with porridge, feasting on livestock's stinking (killed by disease, accident or naturally died) carcasses as well as pissing into a pail of milk to hide the fact that they had milked the goat in the veld or the goat has kicked over the pail (1959:18-19), his conduct is never permanently bent by such experiences. Although he admits that the first thirteen years of his life which he spent in the country side were a waste of time as he also reflects that (during this time) he hated and swore to himself that he would loathe school to the end of his life, he does also recognise that they learnt a great deal at the fire-place even before they could be aware of it, i.e. history, tradition, custom, code of behaviour communal responsibility social living and so on (1949:15). This not-withstanding he does experience challenges in his further growing-up, like having an abusive irresponsible father, being backward at school, experiencing money-shortages for the school, being subjected to discriminatory practices at work and to political suppression which leads to his several sackings from the successive posts he gets employed in. Nevertheless, it seems due to his strong personality which is individually focussed on in the novel, he emerges through this thick and thin able to successfully pursue his

career, leading the type of life he aspires ( i.e. living as a dignified African ) which becomes his strong beacon even though he has to leave his own country for him to attain it.

The detailed representation at textual level of the protagonist, Timi as well as Steven Cartwright and Naledi in **The Wanderers** (1971) gives complex pictures of these characters' personalities on constructed level, which fits them into block four of figure "2" above. Timi's representation included his successful work as a journalist even though he "lands" in this work from his "sickening" teaching work at high school. His approach to social and intellectual challenges as well as to life in general renders typification in far as he is concerned a remote thing. It is on moral grounds that he makes an individual decision to leave teaching, as he couldn't accept the teaching code introduced by the government. This is similar to his decision-taking vis-à-vis Rampa's search. He doesn't just bow to Diliza's insistence, political stratagem, the arrogance he displays as he regards himself "a nationalist to the marrow" (1971:25) as well as to the challenge he (Diliza) subtly poses to Timi about the Bongo's exposés having no political value. The latter is not compelled by the professional position as a journalist to embark on Rampa's search. He however seems to be moved by personal empathy. Naledi's apparent honesty and genuineness appear appealing to him, that she is a single woman with a personal problem that needs to be attended to. His consideration of this leads to his complete involvement in the issue and as he puts it: "much

more deeply than a journalist could afford" (1971:25). Such a characteristic inter alia points towards his portrayal as a pure individual. His dignified quitting as the Bongo journalist when he realizes that his efforts do not produce what he would like to see, is also indicative of this quality. The different categories, however, do not seem to be always clearly distinguishable but they do serve to alert the reader to the significance of both a typical and an individual depiction of literary characters.

Steven Cartwright's presentation underlines tensions between a set social code and what he believes in, which highlights his individual orientation. In Book II of the novel he, for instance, questions the "normal" way of living in his country. Instead of appreciating and embracing the privileges he supposedly enjoys as a white person, he shuns this as he notes that his fellow whites who derive pleasure and comfort from the set-up are doomed. He probably counts himself amongst the doomed. In addition to unequal treatment and provision of amenities, he apparently looks at the idea of separate development of races, which many of his white folks adore, as ludicrous. He however admits that it is not easy for him to forgo the comforts he had been born into but expresses his discomfort with them until such time as they can be available for those who are not white (1971:136), which reflects pure individual consideration. Such considerations apparently lead to him deriving feelings for black and coloured women whose image hovers over his conscience in a black mother's or nanny's face. His interest and ultimate

genuine involvement with Naledi against social norms and current mind-sets are conspicuous features that the reader may look into to recognise him as a pure individual. From the time Naledi gets into direct contact with Steve her characteristics as an individual emerge. Although she is a trained teacher, she asks Steve to help her get someone in the suburbs who could employ her as a cook. Even Steve is initially hesitant to go ahead with the request since he recognizes her education, but her insistence compels him to comply with it. Her individual thinking would seem to have some limitation, as she for instance initially feels uncomfortable with Steve's casual approach to her and prefers sticking to the norm i.e. "master and servant" relationship (1971:164) with a white man like Steve. It is then ironical that it is the same Steve ( a white man) that convinces her out of such a mindset. This ultimately opens her mind and develops her critical and independent thinking which gets most conspicuous in her decision to marry Steve.

The observation made earlier regarding literary characters possessing both typical and individual characteristics becomes most relevant with these two characters. Both of them could on face value be assumed to bear typical qualities that render them inseparable elements of their respective racial groups, but their portrayal reflects the individual qualities that characterize them to strongly shape their image appearance.



### 3.3 IDEAS EXPRESSED BY "PURE" INDIVIDUALS

Most of the characters in the two novels appear to fit in the three consecutive blocks of figure "2", i.e. as outlined above. Apparently due to the more significant role played by the pure individuals as compared to the rest of the characters, these are more fully depicted and shown to belong to block 4 of figure 2. Such a depiction emerges from the wide range of characterization techniques that are used in the portrayal of these characters, as well as the complex construction of the character the reader arrives at .

One technique that features prominently in the depiction of characters in the two texts is narrator's commentary on different activities and features of characters. This presupposes first person narration which can be done either by the main character or one of the minor characters, which would imply different narrating levels since the latter would mostly play a secondary role. The first novel **Down Second Avenue (1959)** is characterized by homodiegetic narration (narration by one of the characters according to Genette 1980:244), with the principal character playing a major role.

One significant feature of discourse in this novel is the retrospective first person narration. This implies also an extradiegetic narration element that puts the narrating "I" ( which presents the more mature view of the older "I" ) at a level

higher than the experiencing “I” ( representing a childish vision of the younger “I”). The reader may feel he/she experiences the same individual (in the narrator) who performs two dovetailing functions, i.e. (i) narration and (ii) focalisation. As this is obviously tantamount to the older Eseki focalising his experiences as a young boy, the possibility of the more mature narrator being selective or “regulative “ in his diegesis could be expected, as Genette (1980: 64) equates information regulation with focalisation. This however doesn’t seem to be the case with Mphahlele who apparently delights in exposing his detailed experiences in literature. His narrative for instance doesn’t leave out the experiences of his humble origins as a young boy. The rudimentary type of education that an African child would go through in the form of communal fire legends (during the time of his childhood) is here focussed on. At this instance narration shifts to minor characters (e.g. old men of the tribe) who would take turns to tell stories on different issues. This allows the narrator to also comment on his observation of the other characters e.g. old Segone is identified as a great story teller (1959:16).

**The Wanderers** (1971) is also characterised by first person narration which is reflected at “homodiegetic” and “intradiegetic” levels . The former level which is supposedly characterized by the two “I”s i.e. the narrating and experiencing, does not reflect a significant gap between the two as is the case in **Down Second Avenue** (1959). There is for instance no obvious difference in **The Wanderers**

(1971) between the two types of “I”s in terms of age, experience and professional occupation amongst others. For instance Timi the narrator and the experiencing one i.e. the teacher, political reporter, Bongo’s Sub editor and the university lecturer are both adults, and they seem to share the same level of thinking.

At no point does the narrator seem to regret or would have done otherwise, a deed by the experiencing “I”. The narrator’s commentary that seems to be the prerogative of the “pure” individuals in the novels appear to be one of the indicators of their full depiction. As reflected above about the two different “I”s, the reader is informed about the various significant aspects of these individuals through the narrators’ comments. This position apparently affords them a chance to dictate the manner in which the reader will experience the numerous other characters. It is, for instance, on the narrator’s terms that the reader encounters “old” Segone as a great story teller, the paternal grandmother as stern as a mimosa tree and Rebone as having the same fire in her as Dinku Dikae, inter alia in **Down Second Avenue** (1959). In a similar way the narrator in **The Wanderers** (1971), Timi Tabane strongly influences the reader’s perception of the characters. These include Domingo who is commented upon as a tall, stout and large -boned coloured man with the extremely pink face. The image of a man who leads a crooked way of living is created of Domingo’s apparent affluent status (i.e. always in good clothing, staying in a big house, with an ever-shining plymouth

1955) whilst not only his residence in a poorly developed Black township is questionable, but also the myth of his income further mystifies the nature of a person he is. This image is accentuated by the narrator's seeing him talking to a faceless individual in the lowest tones of their voices under a street lamp (1971:26). Munshi Ram who is both Domigo's and Timi's landlord is also easily perceptible through the narrator's comments. Munshi's physical description, for instance, would to a certain extent influence the reader's perception of his personality. His reflection as a nervous little man with a gnome-like face, heavily stained teeth and his zobo watch inter alia give the impression of a miser and a money-monger who is more interested in amassing wealth than even taking care of or improving his physical well being. Diliza's pomposity as well as Naledi's placidity are similarly inculcated in the reader's perception.

Notwithstanding narrator commentary that Mphahlele seems to rely a great deal on vis-à-vis character portrayal, other techniques that include character speech, deliberations in thought as well as actions feature significantly in the two texts. In **Down Second Avenue** (1959) the narrator's attempts to focus the reader's attention on certain qualities of characters include consideration of the manner of speech by the characters. This tends to reflect back to what would determine his own personality as those characters that are signified by this technique appear to be the ones that mostly feature around his growing up. For instance it is Moses's manner of speech that suggests his violent nature. Almost every word

that comes out of his mouth, especially when directed to his wife Eva, spells out anger and violence, viz:

*"I'll go drink skokiaan for you...Don't talk to me like that,  
damn you: Didn't your mother teach you never to answer  
back to your husband and lord?" (1959:25).*

Moses never communicates or talks to his wife politely, which adversely affects their children (who includes the narrator in the form of an experiencing "I"). This verbal abuse is in many instances accompanied or followed by physical abuse as his harshness would imply. Even without the narrator's remarks about Moses's violent conduct, this behaviour can be deduced from his manner of speech.

Aunt Dora is one other character that is portrayed through the type of speech she reflects. What she says and how she says it mostly corresponds with her definition as commented upon by the narrator, i.e. as a tough thick-set woman.

This is apparent in a remark she makes, which reveals how much contempt she has for a man: "What's thing in trousers to me! I could toss it on my little finger and fling it in the dust and roll it around until its price had gone down" (1959:79).

Although she doesn't seem to have problems with the family members her intense hatred for Moses can be inferred from what she says about him: *"If that limping*

*hyena called Moses has married me...he'd see trams for flying vultures by the time I'd done with him"* (1959:80) Such a simple character depiction through straightforward types of speech forms part of indirect character definition which nevertheless also bears characteristics of direct definition (through direct statements made about characters ) both of which characterize the novel.

The other important character, Eva, who happens to be the narrator's mother, appears to be the direct opposite of the two characters dealt with above not only through the different manner in which she conducts her self but also her quiet nature foregrounds her unique way of dealing with people and even problems.

In her attempt to solve their domestic problems caused by Moses' neglect of his responsibilities (which includes taking care of the family) she decides to go and fetch the children from the paternal grand home with the hope that when he sees them in the house he might change. Her feelings and thoughts are then expressed mainly through actions. Even when Moses continues to abuse her in front of the children she sticks to acting politely instead of shouting and fighting back. She signals for the kids to go outside the house when she sees "a storm" coming, in order to protect them from being devastated by seeing what abuse she constantly goes through (1959:25). She warns Eseki that "grumbling never takes you anywhere" when the latter complains of his father's abuse of her (1959:26). This reflects her quiet nature which is accentuated by the fact that even when victimized by her own sister, Dora, through for instance using her property

without her permission (1959:80) she wouldn't have the courage to talk to her about it. She would just internalize the problem until she thinks of the next action to take.

The characterization techniques referred to above i.e. the manner of speech by characters, thought processes as well as action, are also used in **The Wanderers** (1971) to foreground certain qualities. This also significantly hinges on the narrator's perception since the depiction would to some extent agree with his commentary. The speech technique is in this novel used inter alia to foreground pertinent qualities through which the narrator identifies certain characters. Amongst those foregrounded through speech is Domingo whose accent appears to reflect particular attributes that characterize him. From his articulation of English words he is easily identifiable as a typically unschooled coloured South African. His clear lack of command of even individual words is symptomatic of this characteristic trait, viz: *"Why don't yous peeple write more about us brown peeple in Bongo"* (1971:27). The general tone of his speech does not only depict him as a coloured stereotype but also as one quite content with racial discrimination. This sentiment can be read in his deliberations with Timi:

*Look, mister Timi, you're Efrican, I am a brown man.*

*Munshi Ram our landlord is Indian. We're different.*

*God made us so. All this what the politics leaders,*

*all what they say about mixing all the races is sommer  
bull (1971:27).*

Munshi Ram is similarly depicted i.e. an Indian stereotype emerges from his presentation in terms of the language usage and his obsession with business and money making.

Diliza, on the other hand, is portrayed through both speech and action. The self-praising expressions he utters when responding to Timi's clarification statements about himself, are reflective of the bloated image he has of himself. This reflects the way he conducts himself with regard to the others. His attitude is complemented by the type of actions he engages in as an attempt to impose his view on the other people. One such action is his luring Barney's wife Joan to cohabit with him apparently as a proof of what he is capable of doing if Steve does not "take his white paws off Naledi" (1971:166). Steve Cartwright, on the other hand, is not really known by the reader until the latter gets to the former's deliberation-in-thoughts. These reflect what appears to be his real feelings which prove to be his affection for Naledi that even leads to him leaving his former wife, Sheila. These deliberations, however, reveal more qualities that appear to be forming Steve's character. These include his respect for a black woman, whose face in the form of a nanny's face keeps emerging in his mind from the memory of his babyhood in a cradle, childhood in the park and around home (1971:136).



As the various characters in the two novels get accessible to the reader through the narrators, it appears, the latter's depiction gets enhanced. As the reader gets more information about the other characters he gets exposed also to the different qualities of the narrator. This means that the reader does not only experience the main characters in both novels as more fully depicted than the other characters but also that these pure individuals do as well indulge in some philosophical deliberations. These include the African way of life, relationship between the different races and social classes, the complex relations with people from other African states and the meaning of the struggle, all of which are elaborated on below.

The manner of living of Africans is broadly deliberated upon by the pure individuals in both texts. Other than poverty (that characterizes rural areas), the communal living tradition which had been the significant aspect of African communities is focussed on by the narrator/s with an apparent sense of admiration. In **Down Second Avenue** (1959), the communal fire-place as referred to above seems to have played an indispensable role in an African boy's growing up. In addition to facilitating the process of sharing amenities and resources by the communities, such places also played the role of early learning centres, as in the midst of story-telling the boys would be taught not only the tribe and other nations but also the requisite life skills and community responsibility inter-alia.

At the same time the teaching of girls in their initial responsibilities which included cooking and taking care of homes would proceed in the compounds. A similar sentiment vis-à-vis the African way of life is expressed by the narrator in **The Wanderers** (1971). He is apparently impressed by “the rhythm of life” in Ha-Kau village on his trip with Naledi in search of Rampa.

The kind of peaceful environment which is presented in terms of the “silence that told nothing or everything”, is preferred to the township ‘noises’ that one would get in Jericho. The cow dung smeared on the floors they come upon in the village has smells that trigger nostalgic appreciation of the African living tradition by the narrator. He comes to identify these smells as not just smells but part of his life as a boy. His boyhood the most part of which is dominated by African tradition, seems to be the important part of his life for him. Even during his stay in the various African states the type of music, drumming and dancing he listens to and watches (1971:257) have some nostalgic effect on him.

The uneasy interracial relationship is one other aspect that is strongly reflected by the narrator/s. In addition to his commentary about themselves as black kids being not tolerated even near the fence of a park, where white kids would be playing (1959:103), the narrator in **Down Second Avenue** (1959) utters specific statements about tense inter-racial relations in his country. The practical examples in this regard include Dinku Dikae’s terrible phobia for the white man

as he thinks that every white man has work links with the police .The subsequent clash with the white police man which leads to him killing the latter clearly reflects the tension.

The narrator's dedication of a chapter as a whole to "*Trouble with Whites*", where he highlights the differences and the problems he experienced when working with whites, reflects his attitude towards Whites. The instances of this "trouble "in **The Wanderers** (1971) appear less severe as there are also Whites like Steve, who are ready to condemn the atrocities inflicted on other races. Notwithstanding this, Timi further experiences some estranged and complex relations not only with whites but also other races that he meets as he moves from one country to another in the African interior. The serious tension with Whites, however, resumes in Kambani, the "White man's city" according to Steve. Timi comes to realize that due to the presence of the English Colonial Settlers, change is not an easy thing. The arrogance showed by the Whites who come into his house without his permission proves the conservative nature of the city (197:311). After getting relief in a number of places like Sogali, Takora, Accra, London inter alia, the narrator seemingly feels that his image as an African is trampled upon in Kambani. His experience in this country apparently gives him the impression that the different races in the region, including Africans themselves still underrate the ability of Africans to do good.

In the process Timi appears to be realizing that geographic assimilation which may result from the political struggle is not necessarily a solution to the problem of the African Image, as he also makes reference to Lao-Kiku whose black majority has political power but depended on minority groups like the whites and the Indians for economic survival (1971:315). Although the political consciousness of black intellectuals would in most instances be the factor that would bring them together i.e. to support each other but parochial interest would in some instances dominate, as reflected by Timi and the other Wanderers who would be compelled to move from one African state to another due to the apparent preference of white expatriates by the host countries. This seems to be another concern by the narrator that the image of Africans is so generally looked down upon to the extent that even fellow Africans do not have much confidence in the ability of other Africans than Europeans or descendants thereof.

### **3.4 FROM FICTION TO DIRECT STATEMENT**

The tabulation of characters in the two novels as done above reflects Mphahlele's high notion of African character which he claims in **The African Image** (1974) to be either mis-represented or incompetently portrayed in South African English fiction. According to the diagram the novelist apparently succeeds in demonstrating constant development of the image that characterizes Africans between different levels of Sophistication.

For instance in **Down Second Avenue** (1959) it is a Black, Eseki, that is fully depicted as a pure individual. His origins in the undeveloped country side and the struggle experiences he goes through in the townships do not prevent him from developing to the level of a good teacher, a journalist as well as a successful writer.

He then emerges as a rounded individual. Although the novelist acknowledges exceptions in the form of black stereotypes as indicated in figure 2., he however seems to be too harsh on the white character in this novel. This can be seen in the fact that other than Sylvester and Jenny (1959:198), who though better depicted get very little attention, almost all white characters are stereotypically portrayed.

Depiction of blacks in **The Wanderers** (1971) reflects a rather better shaping of the image of Africans. This is reflected in the fact that in addition to the protagonist, Timi who is as can be expected, fully depicted as an individual portraying a rounded African image, other aspects of African Culture are also positively manifested through other characters, some of which appear on the periphery of the plot. For instance the narrator shows great appreciation for the qualities he notes amongst the villagers (who are obviously black) in Ha-Kau and Ha-Pitsi villages during Rampa's search. One of the first people they meet is a village teacher Shuping who appears to have the kind of pomp that one finds

among village teachers.

This kind of pomp (splendid display) is according to him often invested by the villagers themselves and may not be innate. Not only is the teacher good in using high-flown English, his house is also , though a mud house is neat, clean and reflecting effective creativity. It has water pipes that are connected through the bathroom and the kitchen (1971:71). Shuping also plays a crucial role in Rampa's search, as a host for the investigators, a link to farm workers as well as through the practical steps he also takes to search himself.

Humanity, kindness, and care that characterize the villagers which Timi and Naledi meet in their search are amazing. In addition to kind treatment the villagers give to the investigating strangers, they also appear to have a high sense of community oneness and genuine interest in each other and lending a hand in solving the others' problems. This is reflected through the family whom Rampa approaches when he is sick. They accept him warmly as part of the family to stay with them whilst they try to help him with medical treatment (1971:121), which is apparently the type of hospitality that very few communities can offer other than the Black rural communities. The family's medicine expertise is also reflected as a positive attribute that is peculiar to Africans. The emphasis here is the fact that the family members are endowed with such skills and do not need to go to school to master them. In this sense Mphahlele seems to suggest that people's

qualities and achievements need not be looked at only through “western” spectacles as the latter alone may not give a complete image, which may even lead to distortion of the actual image, like some South African literary artefacts that he criticizes (1974:136).

The white character has also been portrayed completely in **The Wanderers** (1971), as Steven Cartwright’s depiction appears. However, Mphahlele’s strong reaction against dehumanisation of Africans in **The African Image** ( 1974) reflects him to be much more radical with white character portrayal than his representation of Steven. He seems to suggest here that a positive African image could come by through moving away from stereotypic portrayal of Africans, which is the practice of most white dominated literature. Comparison of the ideas expressed in the philosophical text with the two texts (**Down Second Avenue** (1959) and **The Wanderers** (1971) ) seems to reflect his developed recognition that improved “African” portrayal doesn’t necessarily require stereotypic depiction of White character

#### **4. COMPARISON OF IDEAS IN THE AFRICAN IMAGE (1974) WITH THE REPRESENTATION OF CHARACTER IN DOWN SECOND AVENUE (1959) AND THE WANDERERS (1971).**

##### **4.1 CHRONOLOGY AND INTER-TEXTUAL LINKS BETWEEN THE THREE TEXTS.**

Mphahlele's literary critique in **The African Image** (1974) reflects on various aspects of character formation and depiction in South African literature (including perceptions on both literary characters and people by the rest of the African continent). This non-fictional (philosophical) work was published about fourteen years after **Down Second Avenue** (1959) was released, whilst it is three years later that **The Wanderers** (1971) first appeared. The chronology of these publications may initially appear twisted in terms of the philosophical text having influenced the writing of the two texts. However, the fact that **The African Image** (1974) derives from the dissertation completed in 1956, which is two years before the autobiography **Down Second Avenue** (1959) was published clarifies the point. This also suggests stronger linkages and interplay of ideas presented in the texts.



#### **4.2 CHARACTER RATIONALE IN THE AFRICAN IMAGE (1974) COMPARED TO CHARACTER REPRESENTATION IN DOWN SECOND AVENUE (1959) AND THE WANDERERS (1971).**

Character emerges as crucial and quite a sensitive aspect of a literary text for Mphahlele. This sentiment which strongly characterizes Mphahlele's approach to literature makes him the object of attack by critics who charge him with the unorthodox isolation of character from its context in the novels, which in their opinion could do injustice to the literary works concerned.

However, his emphasis on character seems to reflect a particular unavoidable literary circumstance, namely that the reader will of necessity have to think of people and their qualities when recalling the events and plot of any literary text. As we have seen (see chapter 3), the consideration of "people" in a novel may impact on some other aspects of characterisation. These include the fact that characters as "people" are direct products of other human beings, i.e. novelists, authors or even narrators. All these initiators of character operate from varied types of settings which may presuppose certain premises of character portrayal. Mphahlele (1974:14) refers to different groups of people that feature in his writings. These include Africans, Whites, Coloured, Asians, etc. To his dislike, different names have been used in history to refer to the same groups apparently

for exploitative motives. For instance, Africans or Blacks have successively been known as Kaffir, Native, and Bantu. These titles could also have extended meanings of “servant” or “slave” for both the literary make-up, and the general society. In this way those people would be reduced to stereotypes, forever to be imprisoned in their designated roles. Due apparently to his resistance to the distortion of the image of these underdog population groups, he drops some derogatory titles and uses his own in his texts, e.g. “Africans” for “Bantu”, Africans of mixed descent for “Coloureds” inter-alia. He sees the different humiliating names for the various non white groups to have been thrust on them by the superior white race apparently for control purposes. The different names and titles appear to have created division amongst the groups as well as erected high barricade walls between Whites and non-Whites. This situation which leads to these major groups seeing each other mostly “through a keyhole” leads to his apparent inability to fully portray the character of a White man.

Ideological considerations based on external socio-political influences on character depiction as reflected above appear to have been the *raison d’être* for the representation of the White character as a “monster” in **Down Second Avenue** (1959). This quality is visible in the fact that most encounters between blacks and Whites appear characterised by either fear or defiance by the former and a superiority complex by the latter. The first direct encounter with Whites that Eseki experiences proves this. His collision with White boys from Waterkloof

suburb, as he learns to ride a bicycle results in a fierce retribution by these lads ( 1959: 39-40). The latter do not even think that any genuine problem could have led to Eseki's brake failure, i.e. other than his being a novice rider, but their hard response through kicks and assaults expose their regarding Eseki as either an enemy or not human like them.

The other instance is Eseki's experience of Saturday nights in Marabastad slums. He recalls how he used to be on the watch-out for the torch light, the indication of the White police in the township. He realizes how harassing it was. The light itself came to be associated with the harassment of the black slum dwellers by the policemen. This torch light , regarded as the White policeman's companion, became a significant limb of the much feared "monster". He narrates:

*It was like this: Saturday night and torchlights, Saturday night and police whistles; Saturday night and screams; Saturday night and cursing and swearing from the white man's lips (1959:41).*

An incident like the one cited above would lead to the deterioration of relations between blacks and whites, which explains the novelist's philosophical observation about the two racial groups being able only to see each other through a key-hole (1974:14), a condition that influences their racially orientated portrayal,

as White and Black stereotypes rather than complex individuals. The seemingly harsh experiences suffered by blacks at the hands of the white policemen as demonstrated in **Down Second Avenue** (1959) would apparently make it difficult for such portrayal to be avoided. Hardening attitudes would be aggravated by inter alia dehumanizing treatment such as the one experienced by Eseki whilst helping his mother with the beer business in trying to augment the family's income. His narration subtly justifies his negativity towards whites. During a township raid the white policeman hits him with a crashing "clap" that staggers him against a pole. He then surrenders to their beating and the suffocation they inflict on him. "Now, this is for your bloody lies, you son of a stinking Kaffir: " (1959:42). The white policeman even swore at the young Eseki as he threw him down on hard ground. The bitterness arising from this clash could be expected to have some impact on the prospective portrayal of white characters by the individual directly involved in the feud. As he focalizes his own up-bringing in a racially divided country and amidst the regime's prejudice against his race, it is unlikely that Mphahlele would notice genuine human dignity on the part of Whites, let alone being able or willing to portray such.

Although characterization in **The Wanderers** (1971) appears to some extent to reflect Mphahlele's racial bias as outlined in **The African Image** (1974), his representation of the White character seems less rigorous. For instance, Timi's resignation from teaching on the grounds that the White legislation on Education

was detrimental towards Blacks reflects resistance against White supremacy. . But the step he takes from the predicament of losing his job, i.e. opting to work under a White but non-racist magazine editor, shows that the novelist doesn't use a blanket anti-White approach in this novel.

Mphahlele raises a concern in the philosophical text about the inter-racial relations characterizing the country. One of the significant aspects of the relations that he describes as unacceptable is the pressure that was mostly put on blacks to seemingly make them acquainted with their inferior status. This involved indoctrinating them with "kaffir" related titles which appear to have not been accepted by those they were meant for. **The African Image** (1974) reflects that, on the contrary, the labels were regarded as insults of black peoples' humanity, furthermore they were also repugnantly seen to be contributing towards relegating black masses to inferiority.

The philosophical text criticizes the manner in which the literary corpus of the time portrayed blacks. This closely ties in with the practical examples that Mphahlele uses in **Down Second Avenue** (1959) to demonstrate the biased nature of that literature against some population groups (non whites) and in favour of others (Whites). He notes that most history related texts contained several distortions apparently meant to glorify white colonization, frontier wars, the defeat of African tribes and white rule. On the negative side the texts teemed with a vocabulary

that was offensive to the non-Whites, but specifically to Blacks. In addition to those referred to above, words like “aia” for black women and “outa” for men appear to have been used. Most fictional texts featured black characters who were savages and blundering idiots to be despised and laughed at and those who would be inevitably frustrated creatures of city life and have to decide to return ‘home’ to the reserves (1959:167).

The significant point that emerges from the argument above seems to be the fact that there had been a deliberate attempt by the producers of literature to tarnish Black stature in society as well as encouraging the restriction of Blacks from gaining access and ownership of the economically vital parts of their country. The latter would partly work with the indoctrination about the Reserves. Some novelists would for instance emphasize the embarrassing moments that most blacks experience when they have to deal with the economic realities which forces them to go the cities for a temporary stay/service, with a high likelihood to get frustrated, which will push them to return to the reserves. To accentuate opposition to this ideology, Mphahlele gives credit to those literary artists who questioned it in their fictional texts. These include Nadine Gordimer with her “Jim comes to Jo’burg” theme best illustrated in Peter Abraham’s **Mine Boy** (1963). Alan Paton may also be mentioned in this regard through the role played by his main character Reverend Khumalo in **Cry the Beloved Country** (1977).

In his further challenge of the negative conception of blacks, he presents the feature of Africans that apparently would never have been explored by those he accuses of misportraying the image of Africans. For instance when Eseki comes to the city (Pretoria), although still a young child under parental care, the novelist foregrounds his experiences which are similar to the type of problems that any Black stereotype would encounter. In addition to his backwardness, he gets terribly puzzled by the city structures that frighten him as he encounters them for the first time. His fear of the city sky-scrapers is indicative of the primitive nature of his thinking, which mostly blacks could be associated with. He openly admits this stupidity.

*The building seemed as high as any mountain in  
the Northern Transvaal...*

*I had once feared standing at the base of them, lest  
thy flatten me out (1959:49).*

His being an inexperienced bicycle rider for which he pays dearly as he gets beaten up by the White boys, is attributable to being a "country sheep" (1959:40). But contrary to the depiction of Black stereotype by most White writers, Mphahlele's character doesn't sink into such an abyss. He manages to think beyond the problems he experiences and generates some creative solutions to deal with them. He doesn't look for easy options out of the predicaments, which

the Black stooges would do, like considering going back "home".

Difficult as it appears for Eseki to cope with the school work on his arrival in the slums, he could have loathed and perhaps ultimately rejected school for the rest of his life. But he appears capable of creative thinking, like, upon realizing that he experienced difficulty in understanding Mathematics in the classroom he resorts to staying back after school hours and work out "construction, riders and equations" slowly at his own pace (1959:126). This and other self-help attempts he embarks on (like utilization of various sources of literature, newspapers inter alia) prove to boost his ability, performance and therefore confidence as well as interest in school. The following remarks prove this:

*In standard six I felt as if a great light of dawn had  
flashed into me. In spite of harassing conditions at  
home, my school career was taking on a definite shape.  
What had earlier-on been a broad and obtuse shaft of light,  
was narrowing, sharpening and finding a point of focus  
(1959:86).*

A positive image of blacks is similarly portrayed in **The Wanderers** (1971). Exploitation of blacks by Whites is in this novel focussed on with possibilities of development. Most blacks like Rampa who is presented as an Everyman of his



race, are subtly compelled to move to the city to seek employment. This deruralization process, as suggested above with Peter Abraham's **Mine Boy** (1963), appears to be a calculated cumulative move towards creating a cheap labour force that would perhaps be of significance to the "national" economy. Bayo (1973:122) compares this approach to clauses of the International Labour organization (I.L.O) which described the 1953 forced labour legislation as the basis of the Bantustan Programme aimed at making Africans a rootless "foreign" workforce, directed and manipulated through an all-embracing apparatus of influx control and labour bureaux. At the beginning of Rampa's search, the narrator reveals that several blacks were forced onto trucks while "White farmers raided labour bureaux and police stations to collect their human cargo for their farms" (1971:21). Black youths arrested for not being in possession of identity pass-books constituted the bulk of this "human cargo", viz:

*"You say you've lost your pass, boy?"*

*"Yes, master"*

*"How old are you?"*

*"Fifteen master".*

*"Stand aside, you're going to work your sentence".*

*...*

*"You?"*

*"Thirty-six, master"*

*"Too weak, you're made of shit, stand  
this way, you got twenty shillings?"  
(1971:21-22)*

This situation appears closely related to the Bantu Education Act of 1945, which the narrator recounts as the White government of South Africa's laid down policy that would structure the Education of the "natives" so as to produce individuals that would be subservient to white masters. Timi's response to the situation by quitting shows his unwillingness to tolerate injustice. This, together with the support he gets from Steven Cartwright not only at work but also against the brutality his son (Felang) suffers at the martial encounter with the White regime, echo the feeling in *The African Image* (1974:131) that rejects the portrayal of black characters as stooges.

#### **4.3 CHARACTER DEPICTION AS CONGRUENT TO THE NOVELIST'S AIMS IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL AND NARRATIVE TEXTS VIS-À-VIS THE PHILOSOPHICAL TEXT.**

##### **4.3.1 PERSONALIZED CHARACTER REPRESENTATION**

Although Mphahlele criticizes the way some novelists look at different racial groups in the form of "people" depicted in certain literary texts, he readily

recognizes the novelist's prerogative to "create " a character. Referring to Virginia Woolf in his philosophical text he expresses agreement with the idea that a novelist should present his feelings in his writings and not merely write according to convention. He apparently feels so strongly about this idea that he suggests the sacrifice of even major literary conventions in favour of personal feelings, viz :

*Thus there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy,  
no love interest or catastrophe in the acceptable style  
(1974 : 12 ).*

He therefore sees a novel not only as a self-contained entity but also more real than general life appearance and therefore thinks it should be more convincing. In this respect a novel takes a form of a painting, as it carries the author's feelings on its various components but mostly on character . Whilst he doesn't suggest the total abolishing of the conventions referred to above, he argues that such conventions should have a secondary significance, whilst emotions are primarily significant.

A novel should then, according to this rationalization, be discussed more around issues involving expressed emotion than for instance a story or the plot inter alia.

This ideal would seem to be reflected in both of Mphahlele's novels featured in this study. Although as an autobiography, **Down Second Avenue** ( 1959 ) deals to a great extent with Mphahlele's experiences during his growing up in South Africa, feelings and emotions (around characterization ) appear to be central issues that are meant to appeal to the reader's empathy and active understanding. It is, however, the feelings and emotional reactions of the pure individuals that get foregrounded in the two novels. As early as his school-going age , Eseki's response to stimuli spells out his meaning making in each case and the extent of his either favourable encounter or resentment of stimuli that trigger his response. For instance, his affection for Rebone is reflected in an emotionally responsive way. This strong feeling for her is demonstrated from their initial encounter, which is accentuated by the note he writes her in class, expressing his love for her. The way he describes her physical features is also reflective of some form of affection, viz :

*Rebone had big dark eyes which looked as if they were  
going to jump out any moment.  
I often imagined I could take them out and play marbles  
with them (1959 :57).*

Although his love letter is rejected by her through "the biting clap" behind his ear, his love doesn't wane. This could be seen in the habit that developed for Eseki

to carry Rebone's books every day when they went home after school. However, the other significant test of his affection for her is when Rebone insists that they move deeper in the White parade of the Dingaan's Day along Church Street in the centre of Pretoria. In spite of Eseki's uneasiness with this, they make the move, the consequence of which is their being trampled upon in a cruel fashion by the droves of white horsemen participating in the parade. Eseki rightfully blames Rebone for this unfortunate treatment, who argues that it wouldn't have been easy for them to escape, since even if they had stood aside or attempted to run (as Eseki thought they could have done ) they would have been "lekker sport" for the horsemen as the latter liked chasing especially those who appeared obnoxious in their eyes. Realizing that this argument holds water Eseki acknowledges that his bitterness over the incident couldn't stop him from feeling a strong current of admiration for Rebone (1959 :105).

Deep emotional feelings against Whites and their control of the whole country constitute major focus of the text. Through perhaps the experiences and the type of treatment (his family and other slum dwellers ) got from the white authorities, he seems to have developed not just negativity but hard feelings against the white rule that he saw as inhibiting Black development. Eseki seems to have realized this emotional quality in his practical dealing with whites, as he comments that he would take offence at the slightest remark from a white man if he vaguely suspected that it was meant for him. Such feelings appear to have been so

strong in him that when he thought things (i.e relations with whites ) out he would feel his spleen filling up viz:

*I woke up nights in a cold sweat, sat up in the dark and  
tried to remember an unpleasant experience with whites  
during the day. An eternal dialogue spun around in my mind  
(1959:137).*

The fact that these emotional gestures are reflected through both speech and action indicates the depth of resentment directed to the opposite racial group. The sentiments above reflected from the discourse in **Down Second Avenue** (1959:137) appear to be strongly related to Mphahlele's acknowledgement in **The African Image** (1974) that he felt his writing missed an essential ingredient since he couldn't portray the character of a white man in the round, due to the anger he felt against him.

Characterisation in **The Wanderers** (1971) also reflects some emotional influence, although in a less direct form. Although the main character, Timi, does not spell it out like Eseki does in **Down Second Avenue** (1959), his actions seem to be directed by deep sentimental feelings about his own people.

Apparently due to his strong concern about black oppression by the white

government, his conscience doesn't allow him to remain a teacher in an Education System which prescribes the teaching code that he appears to oppose on principle. He apparently equates the code with the destruction of any decent image that Africans might have. Although he doesn't seem vocal at this stage about the issue, the type of action he embarks upon (i.e quitting teaching ) as a protests against what he detests, speaks louder than words. The genuineness of the feelings portrayed here seem to be more lasting than struggle literature in especially the way that Diliza in **The Wanderers** (1971) is depicted.

#### **4.3.2 "SAVAGE" CHARACTERS AS OPPOSED TO "NOBLE" CHARACTERS**

In his philosophical text, **The African Image** (1974), Mphahlele makes an observation that for quite a long time in South Africa the divide between black and white would "normally" translate into savage and noble character typologies in South African literature. The division itself seems to be channelled through the racially orientated perceptions. For instance, a white man would get to know the non- white merely as an enemy on the battlefield or as a slave, whether it be as a labourer on a farm or a carrier on an expedition. The emotional circumstances of a contact between fighters on a battlefield or between master and servant would then allow for little more than a tendency on the part of the white man to see the non-white as one of a group rather than as an individual. Even the missionaries from perhaps the eighteenth century to about the first half of the

twentieth consequently fail to recognize individuality amongst the non-whites since they believe that they deal with a “ward” who represents an inferior culture which must be completely destroyed as an antithesis of Christian culture (1974:136 ).

Character formation in South African literature then appears to follow the kind of perception that is outlined above, with few exceptions which Mphahlele (1974) recognizes, to have managed to see something positive about the non-Whites. Whilst he severely condemns the former, i.e literature that assumes non-Whites to be savages, Mphahlele shows preference for the literature that reflects the latter quality. His reference to Thomas Pringle in **The African Image** (1974) demonstrates such a tribute.

As against the common view amongst the white society, Pringle doesn't seem to see abominable qualities of “savages” that are regarded as characterizing non-Whites. He instead looks at the latter with humanitarian empathy in his writings. In one of these, viz. “African sketches”, Pringle is approvingly noted as relating a story about an African woman who had to be given over to a colonist to work for as punishment for crossing the frontier without permission. As she pleads her case (with hands raised to the sky ) Pringle observes what he calls the beautiful flow of the Xhosa language - the music of it and her naturally graceful manners. He then remarks that he could not help feeling that whites are greater



barbarians than savage blacks (1974: 137 ).

In **Down Second Avenue** (1954) and **The Wanderers** (1971), Mphahlele does appear to strongly object to the savage view of Africans by other racial groups. Although the characterization techniques used (as demonstrated in chapter three) towards character portrayal in terms of depicting the pertinent qualities appear generally the same, the approach at specific aspects of racial images slightly differ between the texts. In the former novel the narrator for instance, doesn't start his story in the slums where they as kids were born. This could be a short-cut to the writer's narrative which could easily leave out the years spent in the countryside which could be a convenient omission if the writer felt ashamed of the primitive culture that is strongly reflected by the African rural society in Maupaneng. Conversely, whilst the narrator doesn't forget difficulties seen to be part of this type of social community, e.g. famine, high illiteracy and underdevelopment, he feels no remorse for being part of this society.

The Maupaneng community which is reflected on one side to be primitive appears to have had a good potential of producing men and women of high calibre and dynamism. This can be attributed to the manner in which the society was organized to function. Such a functioning would be frequently determined and perhaps also reviewed in the fire-side gatherings ( which constituted indispensable elements of the society ) where also much learning for the young

lads would take place without being formally organized . (As the significant aspects of this social teaching and learning were referred to in chapter three acquaintance with these is here assumed).

One point that Mphahlele seems to make in this regard is that African Societies are capable of educating their own youths. It is perhaps with regard to certain specialized skills that they need to be complemented by Westernized education, which is characteristically dominated by white ideology .

The narrator's reflection on both Christian and non Christian Africans as living in the same village (Maupaneng) but physically separated by a river indicates division between Africans which he implies to have been brought about by the whites through the Christian religion. This can be seen in the fact that these African Christian Communities have various denominations (adopted from the Western world) including Methodists, Presbyterians and Dutch Reformists, looked down upon what the narrator calls "tribal kraal communities" as they referred to them as "heathens". It then follows that several terrifying stories about the latter circulated amongst the "Christians", which included, that there were a lot of witches in their midst, that the "Christian" children should not walk on their footprints as that would endanger them, they would be whipped by the "heathens" if they cross ways and also that the "Christian" kids should hold their breath in the presence of heathens as they would make the witches (believed to be amongst

the heathens) fat on their bodies. However, the narrator dismisses this as just a smear campaign as they as boys would often go across to look for lost goats or donkeys and were warmly received and even offered food by the “heathens” (1959:14). Their circumcision rites were apparently a big secret and would not tolerate any trespass by an alien pertaining to these issues. Nevertheless the narrator appears not to have a problem with this as he also cites some members of the “Christian Africans” who similarly would not condemn the tribal kraal communities for this.

Amongst these are Old Modise and Segone who both feel that no one has a right to see “others” in their naked selves since he also doesn’t want to be caught with his pants down. Old Segone would even add “We all have our secret little gods, Christians or none” (1959:14). It is therefore clear that through speech by not only the minor characters but also through commentary by the narrator in **Down Second Avenue** (1959) Mphahlele resists the equation of Africans with savages, which corresponds to his condemnation of the literature that implies such an equation in **The African Image** (1974). He reacts similarly to the literature that assumes that “Africans” are the “children of the wasteland”. According to him the writers that belong in this class differentiate between “Africans” and “Coloreds” in favour of the latter. He severely criticizes Olive Schreiner about this poor depiction of Blacks in her writings. Regardless of the rock paintings of the Bushmen that Waldo and Lyndall admire in **The Story of an African Farm**

, (1983), "kaffirs" do not develop any better quality. They can't even go to church. In Plomer's **Turbott Wolfe**, he notes with disapproval that Soper who hates "Africans" feels that "Africans are nothing more than animals" (Mphahlele 1974:151).

Mphahlele's reaction against the savage quality being utilized to describe blacks can be inferred from **The Wanderers** (1971). For instance in his criticism of the African farm prisoners' killings by the White farmers, Timi is supported by Steve, who although he is a white person happens to be fair enough to condemn human abuse without reflecting any racial prejudice. When confirming Felang's death in the Washona Killings to Timi, he also adds an utterance that vindicates blacks/Africans of savagery and allots this quality to the White farmers: "I'm sorry. No need to say we knew we're dealing with savages" (1971:11). It seems quite ironic that such a comment about whites comes from a white person, since most in the country were pro-White according to Mphahlele. This vindication and strengthening of the African stature which is commented upon by these two prominent characters in the novel, seem to embody the point made in the philosophical text vis-à-vis character image. The novelist here appears impressed inter-alia by Pringle's humanitarian regard of Africans. One reflective instance in this regard is his empathetic writing about bands of Africans who had been forced into hiding by colonists but later rose to raid the latter's settlements to recapture their cattle (1974:137).

Black character representation in **The Wanderers** (1971) does further accentuate the point apparently driven by Mphahlele in his philosophical text that Africans should not be equated with savagery. Nothing for instance reflects barbarous quality on Rampa's character, but on the contrary his suffering reflects signs of being ravaged savagely by the poor conditions he gets subjected to in the White controlled farm.

#### **4.4 IMAGE BUILDING/ASSASSINATION THROUGH CHARACTERIZATION TECHNIQUES**

Although most novelists, to some extent, adhere to convention in their literary work, Mphahlele notes in **The African Image** (1974) that certain works point at either image assassination of a certain population group or image building of any other. This points to a negative and reductive use of types and stereotypes as opposed to Mphahlele's development of these conceptualizations. However, the pattern that emerges in the literary works surveyed in this philosophical text shows different portrayal of characters mainly between black and white races. The author, for instance, refers to the fact that Africa is perceived as a continent of servants by the western world (1974:160). This is exploited in different levels of intensity and impressions by various literary artists. Since the existence of servants presupposes the one of masters, there seems to be as many conceivable kinds of relationships between the two as a writer cares to explore,

especially in the case of White master and Black servant, the dominant pattern in Africa.

The theme referred to above is shown to have been explored by Nadine Gordimer and Doris Lessing (inter alia) in **The African Image** (1974). Although the two writers are White, they seem to strongly reflect on differences between the White master and the black servant in a manner that apportions blame on the White side. The former criticizes the “unhealthy” relationship that often prevails between the master and the servants in her anthology, **Six Feet of the Country**. Due to the inhuman barrier that exists between the two (master and servant), they are both incapable of knowing and understanding each other well. For instance, the title story reflects that it is only after death has occurred that Lerice knows that their servant’s brother has been sick. The servant Petrus, on the other hand, doesn’t take as genuine the response from Lerice’s husband that his brother’s corpse cannot be retrieved. This instead, confirms his opinion that, although white men have everything and can do anything, they just can’t really sympathize with Blacks. Mrs. McCleary in “**Horn of Plenty**” develops concern over the non-committal and ever neutral conduct of her servant towards what she ( the master) says or instructs her to do. Even when she tries to be “smart” and allows Rebecca (the servant) to call her by her first name “Pat”, she doesn’t get used to calling Mrs. McCleary by her name.

Rebecca apparently couldn't even comment about the dress given to her by her missus, i.e. as an indication of her either liking or disliking it. Gordimer's comment on McCleary's concern is that perhaps the missus is too thickheaded to sense that nineteen years' domestic work under whites has conditioned Rebecca to these 'conventional' relations between Master and Servant (1974:161). Like in Rebecca's case Gordimer's characters are portrayed with menacing moves that are foregrounded through action. That is, since they are not free to express their feelings verbally, they use "actions" mostly in indicating either willingness or disapproval of any issue from their masters. Black portrayal in this sense appears positive in that the author implies that given better conditions and environment Rebecca would be a complete human being with aesthetic potential and guts to express her thoughts and feelings.

Mphahlele's reference to Doris Lessing and Gordimer accentuates that the distorted image of Africans hasn't been the concern of Africans only, but that there are whites who also got affected emotionally and perhaps morally. Although they might be criticized by other critics as having been looking at the image through rose coloured glasses, Mphahlele recognizes their empathy and contribution. Lessing's fiction reflects her revolting against the social conditions into which she was born, i.e. "The White Settler's inhumanity towards the black man" (1974: 163). Moses, the African servant in her novel **The Grass Is Singing**, appears to fulfil that protest role. This role emerges strongly in spite

of the also strong antagonism from Mary Turner, the wife of a farmer, notorious for intense hatred towards Africans whom she perceived to have an intolerable smell. The protest presented through Moses is characterized by both speech reactions and physical action which seem to characterize most of Lessing's characters.

The two texts **Down Second Avenue** (1959) and **The Wanderers** (1971) also reflect the theme of relation between master and servant, although on different levels of intensity. For instance although the theme is implied in most parts of the former novel, i.e. in terms of the reflection of almost all employers being white and workers predominantly black, it is in one significant area that the issue is directly dealt with. This is where Eseki as a young teacher together with his colleagues openly criticize the school syllabus suggested by the Eiselen report of 1950, as suitable only for a race of slaves.

According to the critics it was not good for pupils who were not expected to change and neither be changed by the environment, but to fit themselves into it (1959:167). Crusading against the syllabus by the teachers appears profound in that the novelist engages both speech and action techniques in expressing the objection the characters to the prevailing master and servant relation between Whites and Blacks. This is also reflected in Eseki's reaction to the distortion of the image of Africans in the white dominated literature. Amongst the "offending"



character statements in some literature texts, he mentions “the Kaffir has stolen a knife” “that is a Lazy Kaffir” (1959:167), which negatively distort the true nature of Africans. According to Mphahlele the same texts are teeming with the glorification of white colonization, which results in image building for the white population, to the detriment of “Africans”.

In **The Wanderers** (1971) it is the strained relation between master and servant that spurs the main characters into action that is geared towards combating the development of such relations. The Washona Killings marked by the torture of Africans watching their fellow Africans being drowned into the crocodile infested Chinanda river by white farmers who have captured them as prisoners is central to the novel. The incident galvanizes both Africans and those whites who dislike injustice to take steps towards improving the plight of Blacks. For instance Steve, an editor of the Bongo Magazine, plays a significant role in investigating atrocities against blacks mostly by the white farmers, an example of which is demonstrated with Rampa. A feeling amongst blacks about their position in this society can be seen in Timi’s loathing of the exploitative master and servant relation which leads him to taking a drastic step of leaving his post as a teacher when his country’s government ruled that “Africans shall be taught only those things that would make them a willing follower of the white man’s instructions” (1971:13). This is followed by other action steps which he embarks on including leaving the country to exile, in a quest to find peace and a just social

environment.

Mphahlele's strong implication, which links the three texts under investigation, is that image building and/or degradation in literature seems to have been driven by pre-conceived motives. The white population needed an elevated image for it to sustain the "Master" position and command respect from all other population groups.

This could be instilled in society through a gloating literature meant to give credit to the Whites' claim to leadership in the country. This claim according to Mphahlele (1974:132), can be seen in the South African English fiction of the nineteenth century and Afrikaans literature, with too much reference to the Great Trek, Transvaal War of Independence and Anglo-Boer War inter alia. In order to sustain the mastership of the white population it became necessary to develop a race of servants that would be of continuous service to the masters. To put Africans in "their position" would apparently be strongly campaigned for through literature that teems with the distorted image of "Africans". Mphahlele's literary works, on the other hand, seek to re-claim honour, virtue and respect for the African image. His philosophical text, **The African Image** (1974), spells this out and also proves, as the discourse in this chapter indicates, to be a fountain from which his literary works spring. This is despite the twisted chronological order which earlier was ascribed to the development of the text from the dissertation.

## **5. POSTLUDE**

### **5.1 SUMMARY**

Dealing with issues around the representation of character by Mphahlele proved to be quite an involved project. This is attributable to a number of factors including not only that different theorists differ in their conceptualization of character, but also that Eskia Mphahlele's own conceptualization ranges between the most radical to a more moderate approach. Although various theorists reflect diverse meanings, it has been necessary for this study to investigate a number of them in order to uncover pertinent threads that characterize Mphahlele's approach to literature. For instance, the difference that is noted (in Chapter two) between the traditionalist and structuralist/semiotic view of the essence of literary character appears to have a direct bearing on how one subsequently understands his literary style. Given his strenuous objection to image degradation of Black characters in most white colonialist writing, the distinction between the traditionalist preference for "life-like" characters and the structuralist semiotic view of literary character as subjected to narrative function, proved to be useful in analysing Mphahlele's portrayal of character. This is reflected in Chapter Two where a demonstration is made of how Mphahlele's approach is influenced by the traditional view which emphasizes the aspect of character as a human being.

The significant thread that forms a link between the theoretical views referred to above and Mphahlele's characterization style appears to be Forster's (1970) development of the traditional version of character. The premise on which Forster's theory rests i.e., seeing characters in a story being projected as human beings, agrees with Mphahlele's basic observation vis-à-vis character portrayal. It was also indicated that he admits that Forster's theory of character provides a basis for his approach. This is accentuated by his rationale for focussing solely on character in his philosophical text. According to the latter characters or people come to the fore whenever one recalls events in a novel, which is also the position maintained by Forster (1970) in his equation of characters with people. They both see the value of a novel or any similar narrative text to be depending on the characters featured.

The close association of literary characters with flesh and blood human beings often appears to be used by some novelists to equate fiction with reality. This apparent weakness emerges from those who tend to reproduce their own images in characters of their fictional texts. Whilst this may not be totally wrong, the critique in this study does not support the idea that characters are mirror images of proper human beings. This assumes that fictional works are sub creations of "real life" situations, as they would be judged to be nothing more than more or less effective copying of reality. The investigation of the various approaches to literature clearly shows that the significance of the author's role as intervention

in reality and interpretation thereof as opposed to reproduction, leads to better understanding of literature. Character image as portrayed in a novel should according to Fokkema (1991) resemble an artistic painting.

In spite of revisions by various theorists, Forster's theory proves to have been still a viable approach to a study of character depiction by Mphahlele, which may be attributed to the fact that Mphahlele's interest and focus in literature, i.e. "character" is similar to the significance that Forster attaches to this aspect of literature. This assumes inter alia the differentiation of characters according to performance styles which renders character behaviour that points to certain specific patterns. However, as indicated, the theory also acknowledges exceptions in respect of characters whose behaviour reflects more complexity. It is important to note though that it is not only the manner in which literary characters are portrayed that necessitates reference to Forster's typification model, but also the specific information that is used to identify pertinent qualities that determine character type which varies between "flat" and "round".

In his philosophical text Mphahlele acknowledges the co-existence of these basic types of characters in literature. Although some novelists succeed in making objective use of flat characters, the creation and portrayal of round characters is regarded as a good characterization approach. This is endorsed by Mphahlele as he regrets his inability to portray "the character of a white man in the round"

(1974:14). This inability is clearly demonstrated in **Down Second Avenue** (1959). But in his development of African humanism (through character development), he does also create and feature flat characters in his portrayal of Blacks in **Down Second Avenue** (1959), apparently as a means of a demonstration of how the Africans are dehumanized both in societal and literary make ups.

Although Forster's development of the traditional view of character seemed to strongly appeal to Mphahlele's approach, other theories like structuralist, semiotic and postmodern complement the former in some instances and therefore are also given focus in respect of their interpretation of character. The structuralists, for instance, are noted as seeing a character's purpose to be mere narrative function. This is tantamount to an equation of a character with specific functional roles, (which are spelt out in chapter two). These include character identification with a villain, helper, donor and protagonist. In addition to this functional aspect the structural feature proves to be equally significant. "Actors" and "actants" are regarded as some of the important components of a narrative text by the structuralists. One significant fact in this view is that the human factor is not a determining condition in the process of building characters. The fact that animals and inanimate objects(which some writers may equate people) also play a role in this issue may be seen as one of the possible reasons for it not to get Mphahlele's favour, considering his reaction to Plomer's character, Soper who

equates "Africans" with animals(Mphahlele 1974:151) . However, since actantial roles appear to be a common denominator, his approach does not necessarily reflect an incompatibility with this component. Although his obvious familiarity with Forster's theory apparently determines his approach, the applicability of other theories to his writing bear some significance (even if not to the same extent) as indicated with the structuralist theory and the others that accentuate the signification process as evaluated below. It was further established that an actant may undergo qualitative semantic concretization through the process of a redefinition of a role, which in turn leads to the attainment of attributes determining character definition. This includes both stereotypical and individualistic character qualities which also imply reconstruction. Such a reconstruction, however, seems likely to produce an incompatible kaleidoscope. Rimmon-Kenan's (1983) observation that such incompatible views could be harmonized with recognition of interdependence between the character and action and that the subordination of either one to the other is determined by the type of a narrative, appears to be a sound judgement.

The literary character is on the other hand perceived as a sign by semiotics. Fokkema (1991), however, warns that such a perception should not be interpreted to mean that a character can be reduced to either the signifier or signified. But she agrees with Hochman on the issue of a character being both embedded in as well as detached from a text. This paradox is used in integrating contrastive view

points of traditionalists (maintaining the “lifelike” nature of a literary character) and structuralists (who believe that a character should be defined in terms of purely narrative function). According to Fokkema this should be seen in terms a signification process that is characterized by a reinforced combination of elements from the expression to content levels.

In her theoretical account for postmodern character, Fokkema utilizes a semiotic model which implies featuring of certain conventional codes that are drawn from perception of the world. She concentrates on those that she sees as mostly utilized for character signification, which are the six that are found in the connotative realm. Considered with the models suggested by Rimmon-Kenan (1983) Fishelov (1990) and Margolin (1986) inter-alia, her semiotic model, with its use of codes prove valuable for analysing the nature and function of character in literary texts as reflected in the narrative texts (by Mphahlele) featured in this study.

The social code, for instance, provides justification for Mphahlele’s stereotyping style of characterization. The reference to retail types of business as always owned by Indians (in his novels) to the extent of a commonly understood and freely accepted association of such a business venture with this particular race is indicative of this characteristic. The portrayal of both Abdool, the shop keeper and Chipile, the hawker reflects avarice on their part, which is the social



characteristic strongly associated with Indians. The two business owners are further reflected as having antagonistic relations with Aunt Dora who represents attributes peculiar to poor township people. She is demanding and pushy for a service that is due to her but not easily forthcoming when she has to pay a debt..

For accurate portrayal of stereotypes Mphahlele gets even to the level of reciprocal stereotyping. This surfaces in the argument that erupts between Munshi and Timi in **The Wanderers** (1971). Although the former is stereotypically focalized as an Indian, he is in turn instrumental in the focalization of Blacks in a stereotyped fashion. As he informs Timi of the terrible incidence of the burning down of the shops owned by Indians, he prejudicially holds Blacks responsible for the damage as he reflects the impression that the latter would have been envious of them as Indians, as they make much money in their businesses. This also reveals the strategy by the author to make use of minor characters to assess the action of the others, which appears more convincing than the direct voice of the intellectual black narrator.

Character analysis has also been done with major reference to Fishelov's (1990) categorizing diagram. This reflected on the requisite pairing of flat and round categories with the textual and constructed levels of character qualities. The model is of good utility in the investigation of development in Mphahlele's characterization techniques. For instance, although single dimensional

characters are in the process not only easily identifiable but also confinable to block one of the diagram (figure2) there are those characters like Ma-Lebona and Aunt Dora who are not easy to categorize. This shows that although Mphahlele does make use of typification, in the sense that different stereotypes jointly contribute to sensitize the reader to his idea of the African Image, the difficulty in strictly categorizing some, including the two just mentioned above, points to the author's sophistication in terms of character portrayal.

It hasn't been completely difficult to identify the characters that are depicted in more detail as individuals. This could be partly due to the fact that Mphahlele's main characters in the two novels, which are also the first person narrators, have outrightly independent and strong personalities which enable them to survive even the most trying and difficult circumstances in their lives. This is obviously the case with Eseki and Timi in the two novels, respectively. One doesn't even wonder why such characters in his novels are Africans. His preference for round characters, especially with regard to Blacks, is in these cases well demonstrated. However, it is a fact that his characterization approach on Whites improves with further productions. This is reflected in Steven Cartright's portrayal which depicts his categorization to be near the pure individual although also bearing some typical qualities. It can therefore be deduced that although the categories aren't always clearly distinguishable, they do serve to impress the reader with the importance of both the typical and individual depiction of characters.

The ideas expressed by “pure” individuals in both novels reciprocally point to the full depiction of these characters. The first person status they are given coupled with the homodiegetic narration through which they pass their commentary, helps the reader to grasp the author’s conception of the envisaged African image, as these “pure” individuals prove to be carriers of the ideas expressed in **The African Image** (1974). For instance, the reader experiences retrospective first person narration in both novels which implies some extradiegetic element. This in **Down Second Avenue** (1959) puts the narrating “I” (which presents the more mature view of the older “I”) at a level higher than the experiencing “I” (which embodies a childish vision). Although the child element is not present in **The Wanderers** (1971) the reader still experiences the same individual (in the narrator) who performs two close functions i.e. narration and focalisation.

Commentary by the narrator points to conceptual ideas by the author which constitute the essence of **The African Image** (1974). This is accentuated by the representation of characters in the two novels which reflect scenarios painted in the philosophical text. One big picture that is depicted in this text is one of a wide gap that exists between Blacks and Whites in South Africa. This in turn leads to writers drawing on their own side of the racial divide for favoured subjects whilst the “other” gets relegated to the fringe of the writer’s consciousness if not strongly suppressed. Mphahlele can be quoted directly on this:

*Several whites have tried to find a way out by drawing upon life on the white side only, and relegating Black life ... In my own short fiction, I have often drawn upon black life and pushed white life into the background (1974:133).*

**Down Second Avenue** (1959) is truly reflective of this scenario. No white is fully depicted in this novel. Even the roles played by Jenny, Sylvester and Father Trevor Huddleston who receive some favourable reflection with Mphahlele are too short to justify positive and full depiction. On the other hand, Blacks are depicted fully. For instance, amongst others like Rebone and Dinku Dikae, Eseki is completely portrayed as a round character. The author shows much confidence in this character, which reflects his independent thinking, determination to work hard, sound vision and judgement, all of which leads to his success in life.

In **The Wanderers** (1971), the extreme position against white characters is minimized, although their positive and full depiction doesn't seem possible as yet, since the author still looks at incidences like the case of white farmers who brutally kill black farm workers and prisoners, negatively. Also the manner in which the state connives with the white farmers to subdue Blacks to perpetual labour class forms the basis of Mphahlele's criticism of whites in this novel. Despite the fact that it is a Black man, Timi, who is fully depicted, his portrayal of Whites has improved. Steve's portrayal reflects the author's confidence about

the character's capability of independent thinking. His positive development is even used to conscientise some black characters out of a stereotypic mentality. This helps a character like Naledi a great deal in freeing her mind set from "apartheid" or racial stereotypical notions.

## 5.2 CONCLUSION

A better understanding of the different categories of character is achieved from Mphahlele's character critique. In addition to Forster's (1970) flat and round character differentiation, his classification of characters can be understood by referring to Fishelov's (1990:426) multifaceted version. It was seen that not only "pure" type or individuals, but also type-like individuals and individual-like types could be discerned. Although the classification as such is important for him, he appears more concerned about the arbitrary nature in which characters are categorized, which points at racial prejudice as the determining factor. This is reflected by the pattern that he sees as having characterized literature in South Africa for centuries. Such a pattern allocates roles like a servant, farm/mine/industrial worker, rogue, house breaker, vagrant etc, to Blacks, whilst all decent ones including the "baas", engineer, foreman, captain, property owner and law maker would be what being white meant. This is understood as not having been merely reflected in literature, but flat portrayal of characters has been used to endorse stereotyped perceptions.

Mphahlele's reaction to stereotyping either on literary or social basis, shows his disapproval of this type of characterization. However his reliance on stereotypes (in especially his early works) characterizes his approach in spite of his strong attack on the white dominated literature's tendency to portray non-White characters as stereotypes. He nevertheless takes the stereotyping process further than face value in an apparent endeavour to explore the cancerous effect it has within the microcosm of the non-White population. The type of relation that ensues between Aunt Dora and Abdool (1959:108) coupled with Domingo's and Munshi Rams attitudes towards blacks (1971:27-33) are for the same reason cited earlier as obvious instances of reciprocal stereotyping which points to the cancerous effect noted above.

Due to the fact that the Black character proves to be one who mostly suffers in terms of stereotypical portrayal in not just white literature, but also through the restrictive control by the ideologically centred publication arena of the 1950s to 1970s, Mphahlele's approach to literary character initially appears vindictive. This is apparent in Eseki's recounting of incidences reflecting the whites' non tolerance of blacks in public centres and amenities which were to be used only by the former. This includes an incident where a white girl asked her (drunk) boyfriend Blikkies (with whom she was playing in the park) to kick away Eseki and his friends who happened to linger around the park at the time (1959:103). This sort of bitterness is also confirmed by his "regret" about his earlier inability

to portray White character completely. For this he apportions blame to the apartheid system. The image he has of a white person is reflected through his childhood memories he gathered when visiting his mother (a domestic worker) in the suburbs or delivering laundry:

*I see him play on a swing in the white park, jump on and off  
the African nurse maid, ride a tricycle or bicycle or go/cart  
across a white suburb street, well fed, full of himself, his  
ass frothing with privilege (1974:15).*

In spite of the scanty image Mphahlele initially appears to have of white characters, his aspiration to achieve full portrayal of this character (1974:15) succeeds in his later fiction. Steven Cartright's portrayal as indicated in figure two reflects enormous development in Mphahlele's style of characterization. The fact that this character plays a crucial role in relation to the main character, Timi, as well as his role in transforming others' mindsets including Naledi's (his eventual wife) reflects not only Mphahlele's flexibility in his literary character approach, but also growth and therefore maturity as a writer. Other writers do not easily achieve this level. For instance, a writer like C.M. van den Heever has always portrayed the African as part of wild nature whilst on the other hand, he depicts Afrikaners as God's chosen people (Mphahlele 1974:132). This would be equivalent to a protest writer like Serote who has never portrayed a white

character outside the apartheid context. His novel **To Every Birth its Blood**(1981) the characters that collectively referred to as the “People” are the black masses on revolt against apartheid. Almost all his poetry protests White oppression. He also expresses this in one of the texts: “My aim in writing is to encourage the Black South African to walk with dignity”(Chapman and Purkis 1982:198). Mphahlele’s sophistication is clearly reflected in his realization that the portrayal of the proper image of Africans does not have to lead to merely typical depiction in respect of white characters. The differentiation and character depiction he achieves in his writings (novels) also would testify to this.

### **5.3 RECOMMENDATION FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Mphahlele may appear to have embarked on unorthodox literary practice (with his accentuation of character and feeling) in his writing of **The African Image** (1974) as some critics argue. However, he disputes this criticism as he refers to Forster’s ideas on character (1974:10). Moreover, it came out clearly from this investigation that as character proves to play an indispensable role in any literary text, the misrepresentation of this nucleus inevitably leads to not just a controversial but also distorted textual matter. This links to his argument about the significance of “people” in literature. He emphasizes “value”, which according to him means the way creative writers view Africa i.e. people and their conditions (1974:10).



It is not merely in terms of story or plot that a novel/novelist should be seen to depict a character. But if it is equated to a painting as Forster and his contemporaries suggest (and supported by Mphahlele), emotions rather than events come to the fore. This would instantly reflect possible motives behind character stereotyping in a literary work. Although it may not be readily perceptible, the depiction of the so-called round characters also do reflect such feelings. Mphahlele alludes to this in his philosophical rationalization of his approach. In this, he points out that his discussion of images has been a way of getting closer to the writer's intention, to probe the latter's index of value (i.e. the aspect to which he gives prominence in the text) in the context of his social milieu (1974:13). The probe of his two texts indicated how effective his characterization techniques are in re-shaping the dented image of African characters. His approach also doesn't bear the extent of radicalism that would justify his classification as a mere protest writer, which is what one might initially be tempted to think. Depiction of white characters in **The Wanderers** (1971) reflects to a greater extent positive images and the author's impartiality.

An attempt has been made here to explore Mphahlele's positive attitude and confidence in both Black and White characters. The images of these racially different peoples prove to have equal chances of unprejudicial portrayal in his literary work. This came out clearly in the recent interview with him about his writings. He also does recognize and appreciate the efforts taken by some white

writers including Josef Conrad, William Faulkner, E.M. Forster and Nadine Gordimer in not limiting Black characters to stereotypes in their writings. Nevertheless, the study seems to fall short of the investigation of a White writer that doesn't merely challenge the political status quo, but fully develops his characters across racial limits in the South African society. A research on a White writer's characterization style with emphasis on Black and White character representation will provide an appropriate complement for this study.

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